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**THE WORLD'S LEAST
INTERESTING MASTER
SWORDSMAN**

**AUTHOR: ROKUROU AKASHI
ILLUSTRATOR: SHISO**





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Chapter 1 — Matters to Settle before Departure

Part 1 — Circumstances

Now was as good a time as any to review the current situation. Sansui had left Blois and Lain in the Arcana Kingdom and accompanied Douve, Saiga, and the others to Sunae and Tahlan's homeland, the Magyan Kingdom. They went to obtain permission for the two Magyans to marry their respective betrothed, but once they arrived, they were dragged into a political battle concerning the succession to the Magyan throne.

In order to avoid having the palace intrigue develop into a full-scale civil war, Sansui and company proposed holding a group exhibition match in front of the kingdom's people. They had successfully defeated all of their opponents and had somehow managed to derail the scheme of the would-be usurpers. However...

After the exhibition concluded, they had then been asked for money by a group that had been aiding their opponents. Now, ordinarily, asking such a favor of an erstwhile enemy was unthinkable. Sansui himself was aware that, as an Immortal, his sensibilities were considerably different from the average person. But even with that awareness, he knew that this request was ridiculous. He had to pause for a moment before responding.

"Hold on. First, I would appreciate knowing more about your circumstances. In detail, if possible."

Sansui decided to at least hear them out. He was grateful that they had cut to the chase, but it was all a bit too sudden to make an accurate judgment about how to respond.

Having heard Sansui's response, they replied with a faint tremor of fear, "I believe you are already aware, but we are a clan of shrine maidens who live in a hidden village ruled by the Great Tengu Cel."

As expected, they were from a clan of Rare Arts practitioners that Suiboku

and Eckesachs had known.

“We were living in our hidden village, but... Well, we couldn’t find any good husband candidates, so we left to find them in the world outside.”

Choosing a mate for a Rare Art bloodline was a difficult task. When choosing from people outside of the clan, they had to find a man who had a talent that manifested in maybe one out of every thousand people, was close to them in age, and most importantly, was unmarried. When all of the conditions were combined, it would be difficult to find even one eligible bachelor out of every ten thousand people. No doubt it must have been a very difficult search.

“In the end, we couldn’t find any, and when we had all but given up and planned to go home, someone stole our money. We were using our Art to earn money for our return trip, but we couldn’t make enough to save any of it...”

The shrine maidens began to weep pitifully. So, yes, they had struggled, but it was also a rather silly situation that they were caught in. Still, considering they had no fighting abilities of their own, they were probably relatively well-off, under the circumstances.

“When we were despairing of our fate, the First Consort Sukreen found us. According to her, if we helped usurp the crown, she’d pay for our way home... We eagerly accepted, but...we had no idea that we’d be fighting someone connected to the great Tengu Master Suiboku...”

No wonder they were terrified. They knew about Suiboku and found themselves facing his apprentice. It was easy to imagine the extent of their fear. That they had come to him to ask for money in spite of that terror showed just how desperate they were.

“Unfortunately, she dismissed us as useless and chased us out... She left us with no choice but to place ourselves at your mercy...”

The support provided by the Art of the Shrine Maiden was most effective when fighting a long endurance match against an opponent of equivalent strength. As such, it was practically worthless when fighting in a match against a superior opponent or that ended too quickly.

Furthermore, the First Consort was effectively now persona non grata. There

was no way that Sukreen could provide for them even if she wanted to. Perhaps she had chased them off as a way of clinging to the last shreds of her pride.

Sansui struggled to come to a decision. While they had ended up on the enemy's side, they also had meant no harm in doing so. They were relatively sympathetic, and there was that whole connection with his master. What weighed on him more than anything else was that he wasn't particularly flush at the moment.

"In that case... Here, take this."

"Thank you so very much!"

Sansui handed them the wallet that had been given to him as an allowance. It would be enough to get them home, so long as they didn't spend too much on souvenirs or other luxuries. When they took the wallet, they bowed their heads respectfully in thanks, then proceeded to keep thanking him repeatedly before they left. It seemed they were done with the outside world and intended to go back to their hidden village.

Sansui reflected as he watched them depart.

To run into my master's acquaintances, even out here...

Suiboku himself had been in self-imposed exile for fifteen hundred years, so he had believed no one in the world would still know of him. Unfortunately, the reality was that they just kept coming out of the woodwork. That went to show just how much of a mark Suiboku's sins had left on the world.

"Master..."

Just what would his own reputation be in the future? He had already secured an overwhelming victory here in Magyan, and in exchange, had bought the resentment of a great number of people. While it had been necessary, Sansui couldn't help but worry about what awaited him.

Part 2 — Popularity

Meanwhile, Saiga was receiving instruction from Magyan Khan in the palace. It would have been one thing if he hadn't had the Royal Presence, but given that he did have that ability, it was problematic that he couldn't transform fully into a Divine Beast. It was understandable that such a capability was a condition of him being permitted to marry Sunae, given that Sunae was the daughter of the First Consort.

"Listen up, Saiga. It's not that I think you've been slacking. You have to learn all those other Arts, after all. However, if you're going to marry Sunae, you need to properly master the use of Spirit Summoning. I'm not letting you out of this kingdom until you do! If you try to get away, I'll chase you to the furthest corners of the known world and tear out your throat!"

"Yes, sir!"

Saiga's strength was his ability to wield multiple Arts. Not only could he switch between Arts as the circumstances required, but he was also able to wield them together in various combinations. That was why there was no need for him to be particularly skilled in the use of any one Art. To put it another way, he only needed to know the very basics of any given Art to use it effectively in combat.

That was why it hadn't been a problem when he only used Spirit Summoning in an incomplete form, taking a humanoid beast form when he did so. If anything, his inability to wield Eckesachs in Divine Beast form made it more of a hindrance than an asset for him. Unfortunately, that was only the case when discussing Spirit Summoning's use in actual combat. Now that he was going to marry a member of the Magyan royal family, he needed to acquire full mastery of their Art.

Although the king had just recently recovered from an illness, he showed no sign of being rusty as he drilled his son-in-law-to-be.

"Come on, now! You can't be tired already, can you?"

"No! I can still manage!"

An ordinary boy might very well have cried or begged off when faced with the

king's strict training and intimidating presence. Nonetheless, Saiga stuck with it, working desperately to master the various techniques. He was learning from the king of Magyan, Sunae's father. Given that he had come all this way to get the older man's blessing to marry Sunae, he couldn't afford to humiliate himself in front of his intended's father.

"Good! Get up, then!"

Of course, Magyan Khan understood that Saiga was doing his best and that he was behaving honorably. That said, he made no effort to praise him. Why? Because Saiga had come to take his daughter's hand in marriage but had yet to produce results. Khan had no intention of praising Saiga until he showed his mastery.

"Strengthen your Royal Presence! Then expel it until you run dry!"

"Yes, sir!"

Saiga continued to be subjected to hard training, bordering on hazing. The king kept shouting at him, telling him to put all his effort into it, that he wouldn't let his daughter marry a man who couldn't get through this. Of course, he wasn't there to inflict pain on Saiga. The moment he saw that Saiga was nearing his limit, Khan quickly called a halt to the lessons for the day.

"Ah, you've run out of the Presence... Very well, we're done for the day."

If Saiga had truly been a weakling, Khan might have subjected him to swordsmanship lessons or the like afterward. However, as Saiga had already shown his mettle in a royal exhibition match, Khan had chosen only to instruct him on the finer points of Spirit Summoning.

"Th-Thank you for the lesson..."

The moment that Khan's instruction ended, there was a sudden stir within the palace, and a throng of highborn women began to swarm around Saiga.

"Well done, Lord Saiga! Here, have some cold water!"

"My, how impressive, Lord Saiga, to work so hard on a single Art even when you have to train in others! I have enough trouble with just using Spirit Summoning... I'm really impressed!"

“Lord Saiga, while you’re resting, would you tell me more about the Arcana Kingdom? I’d love to learn about a country that’s so far away!”

“Lord Saiga! It’s a little noisy in here, so why don’t we go somewhere quiet where we can be alone?”

Regardless of whether they had the Royal Presence or not, the women eagerly flocked to Saiga’s side. Almost all of them were princesses from neighboring kingdoms rather than from Magyan itself. Some were driven by mere curiosity, while others were actually smitten with him. Yet others simply wanted to get a leg up on those around them.

Either way, they were all from a culture that valued martial prowess above all else, and here they had a stranger who had come from a far-off land with an enormous, overwhelming amount of power. Of course the women found him to be a worthy object of their desire.

“W-Wait, please! I’m already betrothed to Sunae, Zuger, and Happine! I can’t return your feelings!”

However, Saiga had grown as a person on the long journey to Magyan, largely through his discussions with Tahlan and Sunae. He knew that honoring his vow to Sunae required that he respond firmly to the advances from the princesses.

“I don’t want to make Sunae cry!”

He wasn’t able to phrase his intentions particularly eloquently, but even then, he tried his best to make them clear. He had learned that he needed to turn them down, even if he did it awkwardly.

“That sort of dedication and loyalty is also quite lovely!”

“You’re someone who values women, aren’t you, Lord Saiga?”

“Lord Saiga, wouldn’t you like to hear what Sunae was like as a girl?”

“If your wives are that precious to you, I’d be happy to have them along as we chat.”

“It’ll be fine, we won’t do anything untoward! Probably not, anyway!”

But, as someone once said, all was fair in love and war. None of the women who surrounded Saiga had any intention of retreating. If they had been so easily

dissuaded by a mere verbal rejection, they probably wouldn't have been among the group swarming him in the first place. Moreover, in the Magyan Kingdom and in the surrounding countries, royals and those close to them generally practiced polygamy. Hence, the excuse that he was already betrothed had very little effect on deterring his would-be suitors.

Of course, there was also the simple fact that Saiga already had three fiancées. It wasn't particularly persuasive when he tried to object with the reasoning that his limit was three wives-to-be.

This isn't working. What should I do?!

Saiga struggled to deal with the situation as his efforts to reject the women around him proved to be in vain. He blinked in confusion as they continued to swarm around him. With each of his limbs pulled in a different direction by a different woman, Saiga found himself the subject of a literal tug-of-war.

I can't! No more! Someone help me!

He couldn't very well just knock them all out. All he could do was let out a silent cry for help.

Now, just what were Sunae, Happine, and Zuger, the women who were already betrothed to Saiga, doing at that moment? Ordinarily, they should have been the ones taking measures against the women that were swarming Saiga, but...

"C'mon, Sunae, lend Lord Saiga to me."

"Yeah, what she said. It's selfish for you to keep a man that strong for yourself."

"Sister... Sunae... Please introduce us."

Sunae's only full sibling was Tahlan. However, she had many half-siblings. Evidently, there were even more people who were children of the great king whom she didn't know about, but even among just the acknowledged children, she had a great many sisters.

Unlike the foreign princesses, those half-sisters were working on convincing

Sunae before trying their hand at Saiga himself. Their tactic was essentially to take down the horse before targeting the rider. It was a scheme that relied on being Sunae's half-sisters in order to get permission to approach him. In a sense, they were following the proper procedures, but it was extremely frustrating for Sunae to essentially be asked to give permission for Saiga to cheat on her.

"I refuse. Besides, we're not even formally married yet! And yet you're asking me for this?!"

"Oh, in that case, that makes it better, doesn't it? I mean, if anything, now's the time."

"You did something similar, didn't you?"

"Erm..."

Sunae found herself at a loss for words. After all, Saiga had already been betrothed to Happine when she had approached him and convinced him to marry her as well. She had been the first one to appoint herself to Saiga's harem, so it came off as rather selfish of her to tell her sisters not to do the same thing. Of course, if she allowed it to happen even once, she was sure things would quickly get out of hand.

"More than that, Sunae, what's with letting someone else have a man that strong?"

"Don't you need us to help you convince him to stay in this kingdom?"

"Saiga has already decided to stay in the Arcana Kingdom! I've accepted it, albeit reluctantly! It would be dishonorable and rude to demand that an important person who has come from a faraway land, as a matter of honor, stay in the country afterward!"

It seemed Sunae's sisters wanted Saiga to stay in Magyan.

"Still, I'm sure there's a way around that. For example, stay about a year here in Magyan, then go back to Arcana and spend ten years there, then come back for a year..."

"It's not like there're that many men as strong as him just lying around

elsewhere, right? We have every right to send a delegation of our own, right?"

"And it's because you weren't good enough that the others have claimed him, right?"

"Grr..."

Sunae wavered in her determination as her sisters criticized her. She was well aware of her own mistakes, and there was also some merit to their arguments. Whatever ended up happening, there was a part of her that found the proposal of splitting time between the countries to be attractive.

Of course, that was where Happine, the daughter of House Batterabbe, should have come down like a ton of bricks to shut down that particular line of reasoning. However, she, too, was being surrounded by Sunae's sisters.

"Lord Saiga really is impressive! He's quite the man, having the ability to use all of the Arts and making the effort to train in all of them!"

"Yes, it's remarkable that he doesn't let having all that talent go to his head and focuses on bettering himself... And he's such a good man, being so dedicated and loyal to you three!"

"And he's the proper owner of the legendary sword Eckesachs... Really, at this point...he's even as good as the Immortal, don't you think?"

"It would have been better if Lord Saiga had been the captain of your team, hm? He would've been much cooler to watch than that Immortal, Sansui."

"Yeah. While Sansui's strong...you just couldn't follow what he was doing."

They had all grown up in the Machiavellian environment of the palace. They knew how to take the right tack against the right target. While they tried to entice Sunae into action, against Happine, they piled on the praise.

"Y-Yes! Well, we could have had Saiga be the captain, but we decided to let House Sepaeda have some of the glory!"

Happine, as a daughter of one of the Four Great Houses, knew very well that she was hearing flattery, but even she found herself enjoying the constant flow of praise. In the Arcana Kingdom, Saiga had always been treated as Sansui's inferior. She had accepted that herself, to some extent, but she still enjoyed

hearing people rate him better than Sansui.

Oh dear... At this rate, if they said they wanted to get to know Saiga better, I might not be able to say no...

She was in a good mood, having her man praised by strangers. In that sort of mood, she might very well slip up and promise something she'd regret later. Losing faith in her own judgment, Happine looked to Zuger. What were the sisters saying to her?

"Say, Zuger, are you from the Arcana Kingdom as well?"

"Y-Yes..."

"Can you describe it to me? I would really like to know."

"Yes, could you tell us about it?"

While she wasn't as popular among the sisters as Sunae or Happine, there were still several princesses surrounding Zuger. They had determined that Zuger was shy and decided to approach her with harmless topics of conversation. Indeed, they were treating her like a friend, and Zuger, who had no friends back in her homeland, found herself enjoying the conversation. She even found herself smiling a little.

*They're listening to what I'm saying...and even seem to be enjoying it...
They're making the effort to listen to me at my own pace...*

At this rate, Zuger might end up liking them and could very well end up accepting that it'd be okay for Saiga to have one or two more wives.

But if I said that, I'm sure Lord Saiga...would end up saying yes too...!

Zuger struggled as she fought the temptation. She glanced around at the other princesses to get her bearings.

They don't seem to mind the fact that I'm not speaking! That's...amazing!

Zuger was extremely bad at making friends, but the princesses around her were so good at getting along with people that they more than made up for her awkwardness.

And so Saiga and his fiancées were steadily being swayed by the efforts of the

scheming princesses of the region...

While Saiga and the others were constantly assailed by would-be additions to Saiga's harem during the day, by the time nightfall came around, they were finally liberated from that attention. Even if the princesses were targeting Saiga, they were happy to withdraw before dusk, as advances during that time of night could wait until they had gotten to know him better. To put it another way, if they started paying attention to him at night, or started making moves at night, it would mean that they were getting close to their goal.

Saiga and his wives-to-be were well aware of that fact and had gathered in the meeting room allotted to the Arcanian delegation. It wasn't a room that was reserved for Saiga, and other members of the delegation were free to enter, but that was exactly why they had gathered there. Under the circumstances, if they had met privately with just the four of them, they were more likely to let the situation get to their heads. There was nothing good that could have come from that.

"On the way here...Tahlan mentioned that Douve's allure was her strength in the face of her surroundings... I think I finally understand what he meant."

"Yes... For the first time I'm truly impressed by Douve..."

"True enough... Even she has her charms, it seems..."

"I envy her strength a little... I wish I had a little of it..."

To the four of them, Douve was the very paragon of a villainess. It wasn't that she had committed any actual crimes, but her personality was terrible. She drove Sansui like a mule, and she never passed up an opportunity to look down on people. They had always regarded her with some contempt for that reason, but they were all in agreement now that their circumstances wouldn't faze her in the slightest.

Douve had the nerve to never waver, even if she was surrounded by enemies. It wasn't something they could do themselves, but nevertheless, it was a type of strength worthy of note. Of course, it wasn't any use to them at the moment either.

“Say, Saiga. We can’t leave until you can turn into a Divine Beast, right?”

“Yeah...and it’ll be a while...”

“And we’ll be making plans after he’s mastered becoming a Divine Beast...”

“So, we need to endure this a while longer...?”

If the four of them held on to one hope, it was that the situation wasn’t going to last forever. They had come to pay their respects and get permission to marry. That meant that, at some point, they were going to leave. Of course, the princesses were also well aware of this, which was why they were working so aggressively to woo him.

“Sounding a bit pathetic, aren’t you?” the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda said with a sigh. As the four of them discussed the matter while lying down, he had been listening to their conversation. His expression showed that he was clearly exasperated by their chosen topic.

“I understand why it’s tiring, but it won’t change much when you return to Arcana. Saiga, you’re the heir to House Batterabbe. Once you’re formally married to Happine, there won’t be any shortage of women who’ll want to be your concubine.”

He had chosen this moment to reveal a truly frightening truth. It was true that, up until this point, Saiga and Happine had simply been betrothed. While it had pretty much been a settled matter, even though Saiga was a foreigner, there was still the possibility that the marriage might be called off.

However, returning from this journey would pretty much seal the marriage between Saiga and Happine. At that point, the people who had been watching on the sidelines in Arcana would start to make their moves. Given that Saiga was the heir to House Batterabbe, he wasn’t going to be able to flee the kingdom to get away from that attention.

“Oh no...”

“A bit late, isn’t it?”

“It is as you say, but...”

That was what it meant to become the head of one of the Four Great Houses.

Saiga had always known that fact and it was far too late to be regretting it now. Still, it was a different thing to know about it and another thing to actually feel the consequences staring him in the face.

“You know, on the way here, I admit I was a bit jealous of Douve and Tahlan, but...it’s quite a hassle when you’re the target of that attention.”

Happine, too, sighed at the situation. As the daughter of House Batterabbe, this was an issue that she, more than Saiga, couldn’t avoid. She had no choice but to face it, hence her deep sigh of resignation.

“So, that’s the end of our whining! It would be humiliating to go pay our respects and come home with even more brides! We need to show absolutely no opening for any interlopers and protect Saiga at all costs!”

“Exactly.” Having heard Sunae’s conviction, the Lord Emeritus nodded his complete agreement. “Zuger, you in particular need to be careful. You’re going to become one of the wives of the lord of House Batterabbe. You need not help others, but you need to at least be able to handle yourself.”

“Yes, of course.”

While the Lord Emeritus’s tone had been harsh, Zuger nodded firmly in agreement after a moment’s pause. She herself knew that she needed to do what she could do for herself. If she felt a debt to Saiga, then it was all the more reason to deal with her own problems on her own.

“Of course I can do it. I’m one of Lord Saiga’s wives, after all!”

The next day...

Saiga was once again receiving instruction from Magyan Khan in a palace chamber that was a bit too large to be called a room. Saiga repeated the lessons that the king had taught him as he unleashed his own Royal Presence. His body began to grow and even his bone structure began to change. It was almost enough to think he had succeeded in taking Divine Beast form.

However, since he had been channeling his Royal Presence while holding his breath, he soon ran out of air and immediately returned to his original size. Given that everyone around him thought he had succeeded, they let out a sigh

of disappointment as he shrank back to his ordinary form.

“H-He was so close...”

“Not at all. You’ve got a lot left to learn,” Khan said coldly, with a note of frustration. “You’re taking too long to strengthen your Royal Presence. You’re leaking energy in the process and that’s why you’re getting so tired.”

“Y-Yes, sir.”

“You’ve gotten too used to fighting in the incomplete state. That is why you’re struggling. Stop accepting that outcome,” Magyan Khan said, accurately summing up Saiga’s shortcomings. While he was strict, that also meant that he was seriously watching Saiga and his efforts.

“Try what you just did in front of the commoners. They’d laugh you out of the kingdom. It wouldn’t show them that you have Royal Presence, just that you haven’t mastered it.”

“Yes, sir...”

“Well, you still have a way to go, but...you’re making progress. You don’t need to master the Divine Beast overnight. Just listen to what I tell you and practice, and you’ll get to an acceptable level soon enough.”

While he hadn’t yet made the leap, the training was starting to show results. Saiga felt a certain amount of relief at Magyan Khan’s words.

“Understand that what’s important is next month. I’ve taken the time to instruct you. You better not let me down.”

“Yes, sir!”

The deadline set for him was a month from now. That was also a sign that Magyan Khan trusted Saiga to achieve mastery of the Divine Beast form within that time if he continued his training.

“Get some rest. We’ll pick up tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir!”

Khan left the room and a group of women entered in his wake. However, unlike before, there wasn’t a throng of women swarming around him. Now it

was just three women: Happine, Sunae, and Zuger. While there were other women in the room, this time they were watching from a distance.

“That’s great. You were just told you’d get it in a month!”

“It’s a bit slow, actually! Tch... If it wasn’t for all the other Arts, you would’ve mastered it before we arrived, I think.”

“Oh, I think it’s fine. At least he’s confident Lord Saiga can do it!”

After the three of them each uttered their own observations, Saiga replied, “Nah... I’ve got a while to go, and the next month is going to be the most difficult! I have to keep working hard!”

As though they had rehearsed this exchange, the discussion trailed off at that particular moment.

“Oh, I’m so thirsty now!”

“Okay, then! I made sure they readied cold water for you, so let’s go get it!”

“Here’s a towel for you!”

“Let’s all get going!”

The four of them stiffly and rather obviously acted their scene out as though rehearsed. That was when Sunae’s half-sisters finally started to move. They surrounded Saiga and the others, cutting them off from the foreign princesses.

“Here, come with us, honored guests!”

“Let’s go listen to stories about Lord Saiga!”

The four of them had debated over how to deal with their current situation. If Saiga’s women had been completely excluded, they would have been able to complain about being treated poorly despite being guests. But as they had to move together as a group, it was harder to complain about their treatment.

Eventually, they had decided to pay off Sunae’s half-sisters. There was no way that the four of them would have been able to handle the princesses of Magyan and the princesses from the surrounding kingdoms all at once, so instead they had decided to triage the situation, choosing to control the flow rather than fighting it.

“Mmph...”

“Well, this has gotten a lot harder...”

Having arranged matters in that fashion, Saiga and the others could then each serve as hosts to entertain the various princesses. While that was far from easy, it was still much easier than dealing with an anarchic, frenzied melee.

In the end, the answer came from fighting. Combat tactics always provided a hint on how to deal with any situation. Instead of dealing with every opponent at once, they had paid off the majority of the opposition, then defeated the rest in detail.

Now, that said, Saiga had been required to give up some of the Coiled Peaches and Divine Ginseng that had been available to him to pay off Sunae’s sisters, but that had proved a necessary expenditure.

Khan watched the youngsters as they played their intricate social game of chess from a distance, with the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda next to him.

“Sheesh... It seems they’ve done something before I had to intercede. I thought it was going to devolve into violence...”

“That’s perhaps a bit of a problem, is it not?”

“Eh, that’s part of the charm of being royalty, and of being young. Besides, they’re trying to steal someone else’s man, so of course they’re putting themselves at a bit of risk at the same time.”

The two older men looked upon Saiga and the others with some complacency, faintly impressed by their solution. While there was something a little underhanded about their scheme, it wasn’t dishonorable, so that was a minor point to critique.

“Still, to think...that Sunae, who ran off without permission, would come back as such a grown woman. I was worried about her, but perhaps...it’s best to let her be? Or...” Khan then glanced toward Lord Emeritus Sepaeda. “Or perhaps it would be best to send her officially to the Arcana Kingdom as a lady-in-waiting?”

“You may want to prepare yourself, in that case. She may very well settle in

the Arcana Kingdom and sell your precious Art to our people.”

“Heh, your avarice knows no bounds, mm? To want more despite having so many Arts already in your kingdom.”

Lord Emeritus Sepaeda’s statement implied that, for the moment, Arcana didn’t intend to fully assimilate Sunae’s bloodline into the kingdom. There were always certain formalities that needed to be followed, even among friends, and while the two kingdoms were separated by a vast physical distance, they were trying to create a relationship that also had an appropriate amount of social distance.

“Saying you don’t want Spirit Summoners that badly, eh? Such confidence, bordering on arrogance.” Magyan Khan had interpreted that simple formality as a show of confidence and wasn’t incorrect to do so.

“As you know, our kingdom is quite blessed with talent.”

“Hmph... We’ll catch up soon enough. In my successor’s time!”

“That’s quite...”

“It’d be a problem if they didn’t!” The king laughed confidently as he watched Saiga and the others leave. “My son and daughter came back to tell me just how big the world is after seeing it for themselves. I’m blessed with thoughtful children.”

The group from the Arcana Kingdom was going to leave soon, which was why Saiga and the others were so tense and afraid of embarrassing themselves in this foreign land. However, that was also why those from the Magyan Kingdom and the surrounding kingdoms were moving so aggressively.

They were all desperate to learn as much as they could from the visitors from a distant land. Having been forced to confront how myopic their worldviews had been, how limited their experiences had been, they were eager to learn as much as they could from their newfound friends.

Part 3 — Rematch

While Saiga was practicing his Spirit Summoning, Sansui and Tahlan were teaching swordsmanship.

Unlike the Arcana Kingdom, the Magyan Kingdom had arid terrain and large open spaces with no changes in elevation. The land wasn't ideal for agriculture, but it was extremely suited for practicing swordplay.

Sansui was conducting lessons for the Magyan soldiers, along with the apprentices who had accompanied the delegation as Douve's bodyguards. The soldiers of the Magyan Kingdom were a proud group of warriors. Ordinarily, they would have never taken lessons from a swordsman who had suddenly appeared on their doorstep. However, because Tahlan, a man whom they greatly admired, had vouched for him, and having seen Sansui's strength for themselves at the recent exhibition, they were eager to be taught.

However, just teaching them how to swing a sword and discussing the proper mindset for approaching battle wasn't a particularly effective teaching method. They needed to actually put those lessons into practice against Sansui's students. That was why Sansui and Tahlan had arranged to hold sparring matches between members of the two groups. From the Magyan soldiers' perspective, it was an opportunity to test the skill of Tahlan's new subordinates themselves. While they knew that he would never accept weaklings as his subordinates, they were still curious to know just how strong these newcomers actually were.

"Thank you for taking the time to spar with me."

"No, thank you."

They had chosen one representative from each side to face off. The Magyan soldiers had grouped up on the eastern end of the sparring area, while on the western end, Douve's bodyguards waited. Sansui and Tahlan looked on from the southern end, serving as both observers and officials. While it was an unofficial match, they were fighting in front of Tahlan, a prince of the kingdom. As such, the Magyan soldiers were all extremely motivated.

“First...allow me to express my gratitude for this opportunity.”

Tahlan, with his second departure fast approaching, spoke to the soldiers of his birthplace, raising their motivation even further.

“It goes without saying that Magyan is my beloved homeland. I was born and raised here, and it is where I learned my swordsmanship and Shadow Summoning. While I have chosen to leave, I still love this land deeply. As those who currently protect this land, you are the trusted guardians of the kingdom, and my fellow students in our art.”

He seemed extremely pleased as he spoke, and it didn't appear that there was any flattery in his words.

“For you to train and compete against my fellow students from my new home in the Arcana Kingdom brings me great joy as a man.”

Old friends and new friends; as members of one group or the other, the two groups were going to compete without any animosity.

“Still, a match is a match. While underhanded tactics are prohibited, there will be no holding back.”

With all of that clarified, he made sure to note that both sides weren't simply there to entertain the nobility. While the competitors were from different lands, they were also both tasked with defending their respective kingdoms and noble families. They need not ruthlessly attack one another, of course, but this was no time for holding back. Naturally, the competitors already understood; Tahlan's words were more of an opening statement. The two who had been chosen to represent their sides were both professionals, not fools, and they understood common courtesy and professionalism.

“Then... Begin!”

The Magyan soldier wielded a single-edged sword with a long hilt, one that could be wielded either one-or two-handed. He had foregone using a shield as part of his personal style, not because he was forbidden to do so. Having elected to wield his blade one-handed, he dropped his center of gravity slightly and narrowed his eyes in concentration.

“Dance of Shadow Possession!”

Utilizing his Shadow Summoning, he created a duplicate, one that he could control like his own body, and unleashed it at his opponent. The strength of Shadow Summoning was that the wielders could allow the shadows to take damage without consequence. With their shadows out, Shadow Summoners didn't need to dodge or go on the defensive, as they could simply have their shadows engage their opponent in order to absorb their attacks and reveal their techniques.

The shadow lunged forward, swinging its blade downward. Only a shadow could charge in like that, heedless of a potential counterattack. The Magyan soldier had unleashed the attack with the intention of seeing how his opponent reacted to something that would be lethal if it wasn't avoided.

“Sash of Quicken Self.”

The shadow's throat had been slashed open in the blink of an eye. The Sash of Quicken Self was one of the noble treasures that Suiboku had created: it allowed the wearer to momentarily activate the Immortal Art that quickened the body. The Arcanian swordsman had activated it briefly and replied with a single slash from the stone sword known as Mo Ye. Having been cut down, the shadow vanished into thin air. Though it was only a shadow, and vanished without a trace rather than leaving behind a corpse, the Magyan soldier briefly imagined what would have happened had it been his own body and felt a faint shiver run up his spine.

Of course, he was already aware that the mythical items from his country's legends had been provided to Sansui's apprentices. He was also aware of their limitations, and he had learned of how they were usually employed. But this was the first time he had seen any of them in use.

They move faster with those items, but they're not as fast as a Spirit Summoner. Furthermore, they drain the wielder's stamina quickly. That's why they're only used in short bursts... But that is difficult to deal with in its own way.

The Arcanians understood the weaknesses of the noble treasures and had designed their tactics with those weaknesses in mind. They had also trained to execute those tactics. Further, the wielder in this particular case was extremely

skilled. Even setting aside the rapid movement provided by the Sash, to so quickly and accurately hit the shadow's throat was proof of his ability with the sword.

The Magyan representative was tense, but so were his fellow soldiers watching from the sidelines. By contrast, the Arcanians had faint smiles on their faces. Their training had intimidated their opponents, proving that training's value.

Still, the Magyan opponent was no pushover. Understanding the threat posed by the Arcanian swordsman, he switched his fighting style.

“Dance of the Pincer Shadow!”

He created two shadows and had them attack the Arcanian from either side. It was a very simple attack, but that was what made it difficult to deal with. In response, the Arcanian leapt backward once, not yet making use of his noble treasures. However, that jump was all that he needed to avoid the attacks from the two shadows. They slashed harmlessly through the air where the Arcanian had stood a moment earlier and then vanished.

It was extremely difficult to control multiple shadows at once, and it was even harder to make them do anything other than a simple predetermined action. That was why it was easy to avoid attacks from summoned shadows simply by moving away from the targeted location. However, even understanding Shadow Summoning's weakness intellectually, it was still difficult to respond properly in the heat of a battle. It required calmness and plenty of nerve to avoid getting flustered under tense circumstances.

Just as we know the opponent's weaknesses and tactics, they've learned the weaknesses of Shadow Summoning from His Highness... Of course they have.

Lord Tahlan would have responded more quickly, but...Well, he's a fighting genius.

It was only a brief exchange, but they had finished testing one another. There was no longer any reason to prolong the match, so both fighters prepared to bring it to a close.

The Magyan soldier was the first to make his move.

“Dance of the Funeral Procession!”

He ran forward, producing shadows in front of him. There were four shadows, too many to destroy with a single blow, even using a noble treasure.

These four are the most he can produce, I think. I doubt he can do more.

Behind the four shadows followed the Magyan soldier himself. The question was how to deal with this attack.

Head-on, of course! He’s earned that much!

Most of Sansui’s students had originally made names for themselves with their sheer strength. During their training, they had learned the finer points of swordsmanship and were now capable of precise swordplay and quick strikes, but they hadn’t lost their confidence in their own strength. Nor had Sansui or Suiboku rejected the effectiveness of raw power.

“Raah!”

The Arcanian cut down the first shadow using Quicken Self; sped up, he had more than enough time to do so. But as the first shadow dissipated, he reacted a bit more slowly to the second. And when the third approached, it had managed to slip completely past Mo Ye’s effective range. Quicken Self allowed him to move faster, but this was the extent of that boost. Sheer numbers could still overwhelm him.

“Grah!”

There were still two shadows and the Magyan soldier himself, effectively pitting him against three opponents. The Arcanian switched from the Sash of Quicken Self to the Sash of Strengthen Self. That done, he stepped forward firmly and pushed with all of his might.

“Whoa!”

The Magyan’s shadows were blasted away; not with skill, but with brute force. The Arcanian’s opponent stumbled as he was pushed backward and lost his footing. The Arcanian wasn’t one to miss such an opening.

“And this...is game, set, match...I think?” the Arcanian said, a bit awkwardly. He was soaked with sweat and breathing heavily as he pressed the shorter

blade, Gan Jiang, against his opponent's throat. Although he wasn't on the verge of collapse, he was clearly exhausted. Had his last maneuver failed, he probably would have lost the match.

I see... This can work one-on-one...

The Magyan pondered over the result as he looked up at his victorious opponent. He was less irritated by his loss than he was surprised at his opponent's response.

"Yes, you win."

The standard tactic was to only use the noble treasures in short bursts to avoid being tired out. That said, the Arcanians were prepared to set aside that tactic if they felt it was necessary to win. The Arcanian wasn't being controlled by his equipment, but was rather very conscious about when and how to use it. While the Arcanian hadn't won an overwhelming victory, he had shown a superior level of experience in battle.

"Well done! Neither of you held back and you both approached the match with the proper attitude!" Of course, Tahlan was aware of that fact, as were the Magyans and Arcanians looking on. That was why Tahlan offered his unstinting praise to both sides. "Perhaps some words, Master Sansui?"

"I believe it was a wonderful match, with both contestants focusing on putting in their all rather than obsessing over winning. I would like everyone else to use this as an example in their own efforts."

Sansui, too, was unstinting in his praise. If each fighter had been more focused on winning, they might have chosen different approaches to the match. But win or lose, such a match wouldn't have offered much in the way of fulfillment or useful lessons.

There were times where such approaches were necessary, but they would always leave behind resentment.

The two sides then continued sparring under generally agreeable circumstances. Once the matches had ended, five women approached Sansui and Tahlan.

They were the five women from Tempera Village who had participated in the recent Royal Exhibition along with Saiga and Sansui. Given that Ran was with the group, Sansui looked less than thrilled to see them. While he had no complaints about her behavior at the recent exhibition, he wasn't going to welcome her with open arms.

"Hello, ladies of Tempera, what brings you to us?"

Still, Ran wasn't so childish as to hold it against him. She glanced at the four others with her before speaking.

"Hmph... We're all exiles, of course."

From their point of view, they had been banished from Tempera Village and were no longer Temperans in the strictest definition of the term. Even so, they could only offer dry laughter at the form of address, given that they were still viewed as Temperans by the rest of the world.

"Allow me to apologize if I've offended you. After all, I've caused you all a great deal of trouble as a result of my own failings."

"If you feel indebted to us, then this won't take much time. We had something we wanted to discuss."

In the recent exhibition, Ran had fulfilled her role admirably. Not only that, but she had shown the fruits of her own training, even going so far as to display a sense of self-restraint. For her part, Ran was pleased with the outcome. That said, the other four seemed to be struggling to process their victories.

"We're going to leave this land soon, right? We'd like to have a rematch with those we fought the other day."

"With the princesses?"

"Yes. We did win, and it was necessary at the time. But putting that aside, my friends have a problem with that outcome."

In the recent Royal Exhibition, the Arcanians had been focused on winning to the exclusion of everything else. In particular, Ran's four companions had fought in a specific order to take advantage of their strengths and set the stage for overwhelming victories. There had been nothing entertaining about the

display, and they had completely dominated their opponents. After all, that had been the entire point. However, having fulfilled their roles, they now had personal reasons for wanting a rematch.

“Even if we do come back to this kingdom someday, there’ll never be another opportunity to fight here. Given that, we might as well ask.”

“They might not want to fight again. More importantly, you might lose.”

“That’s unavoidable. More than anything, we don’t want to leave with those wins being the last impression they have of us.”

“I see.”

Sansui and Tahlan both understood their reasoning and even found it admirable. The desire to become stronger was also, in a sense, the desire to win. But that was also predicated on winning in a way that the winner could feel good about. If all they cared about was defeating an opponent, they also wouldn’t mind simply abusing those weaker than themselves.

“It’s not that we want you to gather all the people for another spectacle. Although, I guess it might still be difficult, given that they’re royals.”

Ran phrased it as “difficult,” but ordinarily what she was asking for was impossible. While Tahlan was a prince, he had no claim to the throne, and the women were all royals of other kingdoms. Common sense would make even asking for a rematch ludicrous.

But given that Ran had been rather casually interacting with nobles and royals ever since leaving her village, she probably didn’t have a good grasp of just how difficult her request was to achieve.

Though I guess I’m not much better.

Sansui understood Ran’s outrageous request. He was neither angry at the lack of common sense behind her request nor exasperated by her presumption. Still, she had shown that she was not only capable of self-restraint, but that she had a decisive edge in the form of her curse. She was an ace in her own right, and her requests were worth listening to.

No, more than that, she was the founder of a new bloodline. Her usefulness

was on a completely different level than Saiga or Sansui, whose power wouldn't be passed on to future generations. That was true of Ran's companions as well. They weren't particularly strong, and their Rare Arts weren't particularly effective, but they were still the bearers of new Rare Art bloodlines. As such, it was worth accommodating them.

More than anything, they had fulfilled the roles given to them in the recent exhibition admirably.

"What, Sansui? You're not going to criticize me?"

"There's no point in having an argument in front of Prince Tahlan. I know that much, at least."

"Gotcha."

It seemed Ran and her companions thought that Sansui was going to object. They remembered just how exasperated he had been when Ran had challenged him to those countless rematches. In Sansui's view, this was a different situation entirely. First, the simple fact that they were asking through Tahlan showed that they were seeking the consent of their potential opponents. That was an enormous step forward for them. They were also willing to let it go if their request wasn't one that could be granted, which was quite correct. While those two things represented a low bar to clear, and it was hard to congratulate them for it, it was still something they had been unable to do in the recent past.

"So, how about it?"

"If I may be frank, I'm glad you broached the subject. It would be a problem for us to leave after stomping them into the dirt," Tahlan replied apologetically.

He had requested that they win in a manner that was indisputable, and they had, in fact, completely dominated their opponents. However, the wins had ended up being so absurd that they threatened to leave a trail of resentment in their wake. As Magyan Khan had said in irritation, the seven had won in too overwhelming a fashion. They had humiliated the great king and the royals of the other kingdoms.

Some of that was unavoidable. They had needed to ensure that Sukreen, Tahlan's mother and the one who had summoned the princesses, lost face, and

so it was necessary for the seven princesses and their homelands to lose their fights. Of course, it was really on those seven princesses for putting themselves in that situation in the first place, and each of them would pay a cost for their failure. Given that they had tried to drag Tahlan into the succession and start a civil war, they might even be considered to be getting off rather lightly.

However, that acceptance was only on an intellectual level, and it was quite another thing for the foreign royals to simply let go of their anger. Even if they showed no outward signs of protest, there would be plenty who harbored a grudge over the outcome of the exhibition. To smooth over the possibility of that sort of lasting resentment, it was necessary for the four Temperans to fight a second time.

Of course, Tahlan wouldn't have been able to force the Temperans to fight again, risking a high chance of defeat, after they had already fulfilled his request to win. If they hadn't asked for a rematch themselves, the foreign royals would have had no choice but to give up on their desire for revenge.

"The royals from the recent exhibition are still in Magyan. If I ask them, they'll probably accept."

"Should I fight too?"

"No... I think it's best that you, Master Sansui, and Saiga avoid fighting again," Tahlan replied, shaking his head with a forced smile at Ran's words. A rematch after showing the overwhelming disparity in strength between the aces and the Magyans would only bring dishonor to both sides engaging in that fight. Their prospective opponent would have to decline on the basis of the difference in strength, while they would be the ones who had forced their opponent to humiliate themselves by declining to fight. There was no way he could permit Ran to fight again with the knowledge that no one would benefit from such a thing.

"They probably wouldn't want it either... So, please, let me say that just the four of you want a rematch."



Part 4 — Testing

There were two types of reputations. One was public reputation, while the other was a reputation that was shared among a particular group of people. It went without saying that public reputation was substantially more valuable. After all, that was what allowed someone to be acknowledged as an impressive individual by a great throng of people.

But at the same time, there was plenty of value in having a reputation among a limited circle of people. This was particularly true in this case because this “limited circle” referred to the royals of Magyan and the surrounding kingdoms. Those who had been humiliated in the recent Royal Exhibition were neither rulers themselves nor particularly strong candidates to inherit their respective thrones. They had all simply been royals who had accepted Sukreen’s invitation because they had been in love with Tahlan.

That many of them were stronger than Sunae was enough to give some sense of Sunae’s position within the Magyan Kingdom’s hierarchy. Unfortunately, that wasn’t particularly relevant in this case. Whatever the reason, while those princesses had been chosen by Sukreen, they had also shouldered the names of their kingdoms when they stepped into the arena.

As such, when those royals of the neighboring kingdoms had been thoroughly humiliated in front of the great king and the public, there was no way they could keep the results quiet, and doing so would have created an even greater problem than the initial loss of face.

Further, they understood Sunae’s warning to some extent. The belief that the only ones who could defeat Spirit Summoners were more powerful Spirit Summoners was, in fact, antiquated and dangerous. And yet, it was still hard for the royals not to feel humiliated and angered that their kin, the ones shouldering the reputation of their kingdoms, had been publicly humbled.

The names of the humiliated were Siyanchi Envee, Siyanchi Kesri, Donzila Gayaou, Deyiaoe Hinse, Deyiaoe Utto, Magyan Toris, and Baigao Shiyoki...

While they had suffered painful defeats in the recent Royal Exhibition, they

had already fully recovered thanks to the Mystic Arts and healing fruits provided by the Arcana Kingdom. They had been given an opportunity to redeem their reputations among their people.

As such, it was understandable that they'd be motivated. Their need to prove themselves was on a completely different level and far more urgent than the four who had won. It wasn't just some minor irritant that refused to go away. No, they were desperate for an opportunity to regain their lost face.

"So... Allow me to be clear. This rematch was proposed by the four who won the first round. This is the unvarnished truth. I'm willing to swear on that."

They were in one of the lesser buildings on the palace grounds, in a room large enough for Spirit Summoners to fight. The royals who had been present for the recent exhibition had gathered for the evening's show with tense expressions. There was no outward display of authority or any forced smiles; frankly, a little false cheer would have made them look more like actual royals.

While there was nothing to do about having lost, they couldn't bear the thought of the Arcanians leaving without a chance for redemption. They were also frustrated at the thought that their relatives, wielders of the same Art as them, would be dogged by the humiliation of being utterly destroyed by their opponents forever. The honest expressions of the proud royals clearly betrayed the thoughts that they would never voice themselves.

"Sunae's retainers are warriors who can not only fight to win and set their own desires aside, but who also have the honor to offer a fair match when there is no pressing need for them to do so."

Magyan Khan's words were unexpected in this particular situation because they were largely a formality in a somewhat informal atmosphere, albeit a heavy and tense one. Still, there was a small scattering of applause. It wasn't particularly loud, but it was certainly a sincere show of appreciation.

"For these matches, not only are you prohibited to discuss the results, you may not publicize that they took place at all. The only results that occurred were the results of the Royal Exhibition. Keep whatever happens from here on out to yourselves and in your own hearts."

It was an extremely embarrassing thing to not be able to admit defeat. It was

even more embarrassing to demand a rematch in private after the battle was over. That was why the only thing that was important for this match was the honor of the participants.

“Siyanchi Envee, Yabia of the Four Vessels Style, step forward.”

There was no need for introductions. In a completely enclosed environment, with just the harsh gaze of the royals looking on, the simple matches were set to begin. Tahlán and Douve weren’t among the guests, so Happine and Lord Emeritus Sepaeda were in attendance in their stead. That Saiga, Ran, and Sansui weren’t present was their low-key attempt at putting up a front of confidence.

“I won unfairly the other day. I offer you my apology.”

Yabia of the Four Vessels Style first expressed regret, albeit in a way that could be taken as disrespectful in and of itself. Even so, the unpolished nature of the apology conveyed her sincerity.

“No... I believe you are aware, but we were the ones who broke the rules. You won under the rules that were agreed upon... To criticize you would be dishonorable.”

Hearing Envee’s words, the spectators furrowed their brows faintly. Evidently, they were either unaware of the existence of the shrine maidens or didn’t want them discussed in this place. However, that was a minor matter, and the contestants immediately focused on the match at hand.

“Mistress Yabia, honorable warrior of the Four Vessels Style, I ask that you fight me again.”

“It would be my honor.”

As this wasn’t a formal match, there was time for personal conversation, but even that exchange ended quickly. If it had been possible to settle matters with mere words, there would have been no need for this rematch.

Yabia dropped into a fighting stance and bent her elbows slightly, opening her hands and holding them out in front of her chest.

“Four Vessels Style, Stance of the Facing Blades.”

It was a standard stance for someone fighting hand to hand, more or less. Of

course, it wasn't suited for fighting a practitioner of Spirit Summoning, but everyone present knew just how sharp her limbs could be.

Hard to deal with.

The Four Vessels Style, which utilized Orb Blood, turned the wielder's limbs into deadly weapons. Unlike ordinary steel blades, they could easily pierce the hide of a Spirit Summoner's Divine Beast form. Of course, everything other than their four limbs remained normal, but even then, the thought of coming into contact with those limbs was enough to give Envee pause.

The spectators felt a prickle of fear. Despite the fact that Yabia was in a defensive stance, they felt as though they were being threatened by her. For Yabia's part, she was ready.

So, come at me.

Defense with the Four Vessels Style was different from ordinary defense. If attacked by a blade, it would split the blade in half. If attacked by a warhammer, it would crush the warhammer. When punched, it would break the punching fist. Those ignorant of the Four Vessels Style would attack recklessly and regret it, while those who knew about it would find themselves hesitating.

All right, here we go!

Which was why there was a point to this match. Envee steeled herself and transformed into a humanoid beast form. Her strength and speed weren't nearly as enhanced as when in her Divine Beast form, but the fact that her body didn't swell into a bigger form was an enormous advantage in this particular situation. Because she couldn't touch her opponent's limbs, she would have no chance of victory if her own limbs were too large.

Ordinarily, this wasn't a recommended method of fighting, but none of the spectators could criticize her choice. Having witnessed the previous match, they understood that this was the right approach. The issue was what she would do from here. Envee was both faster and stronger, true. However, Yabia's arms and legs could cut deep into her opponent simply by touching her.

As the spectators waited to see how Envee would fight, she pounced on her

opponent without fear.

As I expected! Yabia thought.

There's no point in a rematch if I don't fight this way! Envee yelled in her head as she leapt.

Envee could have made use of her superior speed to try to attack Yabia from behind. However, that would have been disrespectful to an opponent who had invited a rematch. Instead, Envee leaned forward as she charged toward Yabia, seeking a frontal clash with her opponent. She was aiming not to slash her opponent with her claws, but to pierce her defenses with thrusts.

She's fast! Not as fast as Ran, but still fast!

Yabia had a Sash of Quicken Self herself. She could boost her speed, if temporarily, but it wasn't enough to match the speed of a Spirit Summoner, even in humanoid form. As such, she had to respond with the minimum necessary amount of movement.

Yabia was nervous too, but she still managed to move her right hand to block Envee's thrust.

"Guh!"

When she tried to block with her right hand, the Stance of the Facing Blades collapsed. Envee took advantage of that opening and lashed out with a kick. The blow, enhanced by Spirit Summoning, landed on Yabia's unprotected stomach. With that strike, the match was over.

"Would you consider that a sneak attack?"

"Not at all. That was a proper technique... I'm the one who is lacking for being unable to withstand it..."

Feinting with a punch and switching over to a kick was a standard technique in hand-to-hand combat, and there were similar combinations in the Four Vessels Style. Of course, Yabia had anticipated the possibility, but being unable to respond was simply a lack of skill on her part.

"You win."

Yabia held her aching stomach as she quietly admitted her defeat. To be easily

defeated by an opponent she had just recently demolished... Yabia had, essentially, been exposed in front of an audience, but her expression was one of relief.

“I did my best, but you were stronger...”

She preferred a loss that she could be proud of rather than a win she was ashamed of. Yabia had fully accepted that truth and did not hesitate to express it.

“Yabia of the Four Vessels Style... Thank you for agreeing to fight with me again.”

Yabia had chosen to fight Envee, even when she knew that she was likely to lose, just to give Envee the opportunity to redeem herself. Even now knowing that Yabia wasn't some hidden genius, but rather just a backwater martial artist wannabe, Envee still chose to express her gratitude.

“Enough. Take Yabia to the mystics.”

Magyan Khan had lavishly complimented the winners during the Royal Exhibition, but not today.

Yes, this is fine. Anything else would be humiliating.

Envee bowed her head to Magyan Khan despite the lack of praise. It was enough that she had been given this chance, and that so many of her kin and other royals had seen her fight. To ask for anything more would simply be self-aggrandizement.

“Mistress Yabia.”

“Yes?”

Yabia seemed to be struggling to breathe as she was helped to her feet by a taciturn servant. Envee approached her to have her relay a short message.

“Please tell Prince Tahlan...that I am sorry.”

“I shall.”

If she had won that day, she would have been able to say so much more. But after this redemptive match, that was the most she could say.

Part 5 — Indicators

The first match ended without applause or praise and was followed immediately by the second match between Siyanchi Kesri and Suji of the Bursting Venom Style. Their battle started with an air of tense silence.

It wasn't a bad sort of tension, though. The two opponents were fully focused on one another, having cast any unnecessary thoughts to the side. Those watching the match understood the meaning of the silence between them, and they were careful not to make a sound lest they disrupt the mood.

An Art that makes anything touched by the user's hands and feet explode... It's not as dangerous as the Four Vessels Style now that I understand how it works, however...

The Four Vessels Style was well-suited to defense; even if one knew its nature, it was a difficult Art to attack. But the Bursting Venom Style wasn't in the same mold. It was true that the wielder's arms and legs were dangerous threats, but it didn't provide them with much in the way of defense. It also took more time to be effective than the Four Vessels Style, and, even if touched by a wielder, it was possible to defeat the user before they could trigger the explosion.

She's not using the soles of her feet to set explosions. Perhaps because we're in the palace...

There was also the matter of terrain. If they were outdoors, Suji would have been free to make the ground explode to her heart's content. However, making the floor explode in the palace risked injuring the important people in the audience and might even deal serious damage to an expensive building.

Perhaps because of this, Suji wasn't using the soles of her feet to set land mines as a means of trapping Kesri. This decision ceded to the Spirit Summoner far too great an advantage.

"Phew..."

Kesri had heard that Suji and the others had been displeased at winning in a fashion that wasn't consistent with their own abilities, which was why they had

asked for a rematch. That was clear to see in the expression of acceptance and satisfaction on her opponent's face.

But Kesri had a hard time accepting simply just approaching Suji, hitting her, and winning with sheer strength. That was why she approached without using Spirit Summoning; she was trying to defeat Suji with just her own fighting ability, not with aid from the divine spirits.

"In that case..."

In response, Suji discarded the noble treasures she wore, intending to wield just Bursting Venom Style against her opponent. In this situation, Suji held the advantage. Even though she had set aside her special equipment, she had no reason to not use Bursting Venom Style. As such, Kesri was at a greater disadvantage.

The fact that Suji would win the moment she was able to touch any part of Kesri's body with her palm was an enormous edge, all the more so because the Bursting Venom Style was a fighting style focused around providing those opportunities to its wielder.

At this stage, it even appeared to the observers that Kesri had abandoned the match and that there was no point in continuing the duel. But that thought was quickly proven wrong when the match actually began.

"Grr!"

Suji tried to make contact with her opponent's hands or legs while avoiding her head and torso. Although the Temperan fighter did her best under those conditions, Kesri was able to handle her attacks easily. Even considering that Kesri knew what her opponent was trying to do and that she merely needed to worry about her opponent's palms and soles, it was still impressive that she could keep her opponent from doing so much as touching her in hand-to-hand combat.

"Oomph!"

By contrast, Suji began taking blows. Both fighters were using their bodies' own innate abilities, rather than enhancing their physical abilities, which highlighted the gap in relative strength.

Put simply, Suji was weak. Like the other three, she had been considered a failure back in Tempera Village, and this was known even by the Magyans, as Sukreen had noted before the exhibition. They had won with enhanced weapons and specialized tactics, not their skills.

And yet...she came to face me.

The phrase “showing one’s true colors,” of course, was derived from the nautical use of false colors, or flags of allegiance, to conceal the true nature of the ship under sail. At times, however, this also meant that a merchant ship might attempt to appear to be a warship by flying false colors. Suji and the others had disguised themselves with their tactics and equipment in public, and now, having removed those false colors, had revealed themselves to those watching these matches. They had done so, conscious of exposing their weaknesses, entirely intentionally.

“Guh!”

Kesri finally brought down Suji with her fists. Because the Bursting Venom Style offered no physical enhancements, an unskilled wielder could be defeated by a skilled opponent, even if they weren’t using any Art of their own.

“Well done,” Magyan Khan said after a moment’s pause.

She had fought knowing that this was how it would end. She had, in essence, fought in order to be humiliated in front of a crowd of dignitaries, and had expressed to a country that she was about to depart that she was weak. It was an honest, honorable way to depart. Magyan Khan offered his praise not to Kesri, who had overwhelmed her opponent without transforming, but instead to Suji, who had chosen to lose on level ground.

The fact was that Kesri, despite winning, looked regretful, while Suji looked relieved despite the welts and bruises on her face. The match over, they left the stage without a further word.

Taking their places were Donzila Gayaou and Kazuno of the Drunken Fist Style. Both of them dropped into their respective stances, and the observing dignitaries watched with tense expressions.

An invisible field that disrupts one’s sense of balance...

Fighting against a wielder of the Drunken Fist Style wasn't simply a matter of watching their hands and feet. That was because they were capable of wielding a power that was invisible to their opponent and they had the ability to project that power a certain distance away.

However, a Spirit Summoner's physical enhancements were enough to stand up to a Drunken Fist Style wielder's power for a while. Gayaou understood this because she had actually experienced it for herself. Unfortunately, because full enhancement required taking Divine Beast form, resistance also meant growing larger and gaining more blind spots. If that was so, however, what would happen if she fought against Kazuno at human size? That was something they'd need to try to see.

I have already lost once... I have no intention of obsessing over winning!

Gayaou lunged forward into close combat. She maintained her humanoid size while she took beast form, even as she ran toward her opponent. It was a courageous act, given that she knew that her Temperan foe awaited her with a trap: her invisible energy field.

Seeing her approach, Kazuno also committed herself.

Unlike last time, I'm not here to win. But I'm not here to lose either!

Kazuno maintained her grappling stance and stepped forward. With that, the battle of wits between the two began.

Wait... She hasn't used her power yet?!

Although her physical abilities were enhanced, Gayaou wasn't in a position to run at full strength. If she fell while sprinting, that alone could very well knock her out of the battle. Even though she had enhanced her own abilities, she had been holding back in terms of speed. That was why Kazuno could still see her move.

When? When is she going to use it?!

It was an exchange that lasted not a matter of seconds, but an even shorter span of time. If Kazuno used her energy field too quickly, even with her sense of balance disrupted, Gayaou would probably try to regain her footing and continue fighting. If Kazuno was too slow in deploying her field, Gayaou's attack

would hit her. That one blow would be enough to settle the matter.

Now!

Kazuno was attempting to find the exact timing in that short burst of time. Despite her hesitation, Gayaou lashed out with her fist, and Kazuno deployed her energy field just before Gayaou's arm reached full extension.

Oomph!

The energy field created by the Drunken Fist Style was like a soap bubble. When projecting the bubble remotely, it could only move very slowly. But when extending it from one's body, it could be deployed in an instant. Kazuno's energy field caught Gayaou's head before the Spirit Summoner's fist could reach her. Gayaou lost her sense of balance as she was unleashing a blow; as fast as she was moving, that effect necessarily disrupted her positioning in proportion to her speed.

Having stepped in to unleash her blow, Gayaou's body was caught completely off-balance in mid-strike.

"Drunken Fist Style, Double Leg Sweep!"

It wasn't a flashy move like a one-armed back throw; all Kazuno did was sweep Gayaou's leg. But from Gayaou's perspective, as the one caught in Kazuno's energy field, it was like having her legs swept out from under her twice in quick succession. She wasn't able to maintain her footing and promptly tripped.

"Oomph..."

"Phew..."

Yes, all she did was trip. She hadn't been dropped to the ground with a throw, but rather had just fallen over. It was, of course, not nearly enough to do any major damage. Moreover, because she had moved wildly, she had been able to escape the energy field around her head.

Gayaou stood up and opened the distance between herself and Kazuno, having immediately grasped what had just happened.

I should have kicked her head or stepped on her face before she could get

up...but there was no way I was going to do it in time.

While the Drunken Fist Style was a martial art similar to judo, it wasn't made with sports in mind. In sparring matches, they would stop short of actually landing a blow or step on the space next to an opponent's face, but part of the style still included follow-up attacks to be landed on a prone opponent. In fact, practitioners of the style considered their throws incomplete without such a follow-up attack.

And the fact was, Kazuno's attack had been incomplete and insufficient. Gayaou had just tripped and she was still more than capable of fighting. Even though Kazuno was fighting a Spirit Summoner, if she had stepped on or kicked Gayaou's head, she would have at least inflicted some damage. But it was precisely because Kazuno had been unable to do so that the match continued.

Still not good enough... I was too focused on the Double Leg Sweep and couldn't connect it to a finisher.

Both of them reflected on their mistakes and dropped back into their stances, pondering their next moves.

I was able to see that move... But that just means there's more to work with...

I want to make sure I hit her next time... But I don't know if I can just by mixing in other methods...

Their minds raced as they considered their options, but Gayaou was the first to move.

Oh, I haven't decided...!

Gayaou stepped forward before Kazuno had completed her thoughts, and the Temperan girl couldn't help but shrink back, her body reflexively backing away.

I can't! I can't humiliate myself again!

There was no glory in victory, but she didn't want to offer excuses in a fight. That dedication, that commitment, forced Gayaou forward. She couldn't afford to be on the back foot emotionally.

Oh no!

Kazuno had been intimidated by Gayaou's intensity. She tried to regain her

footing, but Gayaou was simply much faster.

The only move I can do here...!

That was why she had to act reflexively. Kazuno, with her relative lack of skill, only had a single technique she could use under these circumstances, and she moved to execute it immediately.

Step back and...!

Ordinarily, it was a move where one pretended to be intimidated or drew in the opponent with a feint. But Kazuno had actually been intimidated, and her opponent had moved first.

Still, she had chosen the right move. The technique involved leaving the bubble in the air and stepping backward. The logic behind it was to move the opponent, not the bubble, because it was easier to make the opponent move than to move the bubble.

Kazuno stepped backward as she deployed her field and left it suspended in midair. She then waited for her opponent a step behind that bubble.

There it is...but I can withstand it!

Gayaou leapt into the field. She felt disoriented immediately, of course, but she continued forward, forcing herself to bear with it.

Just as she steps forward...!

The field being invisible meant that it was impossible to know that one had entered the field until its effects struck. Further, it also meant that someone inside the field couldn't know that they had left until its effects wore off.

Wha...? The field is gone?!

Grasping the moment they step out of the field!

The next events happened in the space of a split second. Gayaou was enveloped in a field for a heartbeat and felt close to losing her balance, and then that effect abruptly ceased.

From her perspective, it felt as though Kazuno had suddenly terminated the field, even though she hadn't done anything. It was precisely because Gayaou

had moved forward with such determination that her determination struck against empty air.

“Drunken Fist Style... Awakening Back Throw!”

Using that one brief psychological opening, Kazuno grappled with Gayaou. She grabbed the humanoid beast’s clothes and fur and immediately threw her over her back.

I-Is this another...Art? No, the world is actually turning upside down...!

With Drunken Fist Style, robbing an opponent of their balance with the Art could then be combined with directly changing the opponent’s physical orientation using martial arts moves; these two techniques could also be used separately or sequentially. That was the fundamental principle behind the Drunken Fist Style and the key to its mastery. It wasn’t simply about continually subjecting the opponent to the energy field and denying them their sense of balance. That wouldn’t be a martial art.

“Guh...!”

The throw itself was executed perfectly. Gayaou wasn’t able to break her fall and Kazuno had timed her throw correctly. Had this been a judo match, that would have been the end. But while it was a match, it wasn’t judo. No one in this room even knew of the existence of something called judo.

Oh no... I stopped at the throw!

While Kazuno had managed to pull off her maneuver at the last moment, she immediately regretted her actions. She first rued the fact that she had been spooked into using that technique, then that she hadn’t been able to follow up on her throw.

I can’t use submission holds on a Spirit Summoner. They’re stronger and they have claws...so I guess I’ll have to try again...

Her lack of skill meant that she had missed two opportunities to win. The Drunken Fist Style was an effective fighting style, but Kazuno herself had made mistakes that led to failing to finish her opponent. The more she understood the effectiveness of the techniques, the more she recognized her own failure to effectively use them. She felt her cheeks flush with the heat of embarrassment.

She made no effort to restrain Gayaou after her throw and moved back to drop back into a stance.

What an embarrassing match... I can't face the other two...

But Gayaou didn't take a combat stance in response, instead pausing for a moment before saying, "I yield."

The whole chamber was silent for a moment.

"Huh?"

The floor in the room was made of stone, and stone's hardness could make throws deadly. Someone thrown onto the floor back-first, even if they properly broke their fall, might still be badly hurt. That only applied to normal human beings, though. Having strengthened herself with Spirit Summoning, Gayaou hadn't sustained much in the way of injuries, even though she had failed to break her fall.

It might have been different had she been dropped on her head, or if a noble treasure had been involved. But having moved reflexively, Kazuno hadn't been able to put that much thought behind her attack.

"I've lost." Gayaou stood up; she had returned to human form, even though she was still more than capable of fighting.

"B-But..."

"I understand that you're not satisfied, but...I also have no intention of fighting further."

Gayaou understood just as well as Kazuno that the Temperan's techniques were incomplete and inadequate. She knew that she had only been tripped and thrown. Had this been a fight to the death, she would have continued fighting. But this was a sparring match, not a time or place to confirm who was stronger or whose Art was superior.

"Even if I landed a blow from here, I wouldn't be proud of my victory," Gayaou explained.

There was a brief pause.

Kazuno felt that she had missed two perfect opportunities to win and Gayaou felt that she almost lost twice. Even so, for Gayaou, the match itself had been a valuable opportunity. Had she been able to survive her opponent's attacks through her own actions, it would have been one thing, but she had simply gotten lucky because her opponent had failed to finish her. Having that happen twice in a row had completely sapped Gayaou of any will to fight. There was no meaning in continuing the match for her.

"My apologies," Kazuno said, having understood Gayaou's thought process. The least she should have done was properly execute her moves and thus secure her win. Instead, she had forced Gayaou to declare defeat despite her opponent likely still feeling more than capable of continuing to fight. Kazuno was expressing her regret for the fact that the match had ended inconclusively due to her own lack of skill, in a situation where neither combatant could easily schedule another rematch.

"No... I was able to properly experience the techniques of the Drunken Fist Style."

During the Royal Exhibition, the Arts and the noble treasures had taken up the bulk of everyone's attention. This time, she had been able to see Kazuno's fighting style properly for herself, and she had done so in front of visiting dignitaries. Consequently, her fight had meaning. Having accepted that logic, Gayaou stepped away from the field.

It was now time for the last match for this event: Deyiaoe Hinse against Konoko of the Mist Shadow Style.

Now... That wasn't a good match, but at least it was honest. But what am I supposed to do exactly? My opponent wields illusions that have no mass...which makes my position that much harder.

The match between Spirit Summoning and Drunken Fist Style, as expected, had been one where either side could have won. But Spirit Summoning against Mist Shadow Style was a completely different matter. Unlike the first three styles, Mist Shadow Style was focused on catching an opponent off-guard. As such, fighting a head-on match in a situation where the opponent already knew the strengths and weaknesses of the style actually ran counter to the Mist

Shadow Style's foundational principles.

Of course, we'll still fight anyway.

And yet she's still here...!

The Mist Shadow Style had always been a martial art that utilized a great deal of concealed weaponry, which was why it had been relatively easy to adapt it to incorporate new weapons into it, in the form of the noble treasures. However, Konoko had no intention of using them.

Mastery of the Mist Shadow Style rests in not letting the opponent or the spectators know what the fighter is doing. In which case, this means... Then...

Shadow Summoners could only make shadow duplicates of themselves, but the Mist Shadow Style could create illusions of anything. Because the illusions had no actual substance, it tested the wielder's creativity.

"Mist Shadow Style, False Curtain of Flame!"

The illusion Konoko unleashed against Hinse was a wall of flame, one that completely impeded Hinse's line of sight. It was like a piece of artwork, emitting no heat or light, but was enough to catch Hinse off guard.

She blocked my line of sight... As she should!

Blocking an opponent's line of sight was an extremely effective way of using illusions, even when the opponent knew that the illusion had no substance behind it. Just being able to freely block an opponent's line of sight was extremely useful in and of itself, but that was also why it was easy to anticipate.

Nothing to fear now!

Hinse, too, had abandoned any commitment to victory. It would have been another thing if she was here just to win, but her actual goal here was to fight Konoko. For her, the only option available was to charge forward and engage. Hinse transformed into humanoid beast form as she dashed into the wall of flame.

"Mist Shadow Style, Carpet Pulling!"

Hinse noticed with her first step through the fire that there was something wrong with the texture of the floor underfoot. The wall of flame disappeared in

an instant and it quickly became clear what Konoko was doing. She had used the wall of flame as a decoy to lay a sheet of cloth out on the floor. Hinse had stepped right on top of it.

“Blast...!”

It was less a trap than it was a child’s prank. Pulling a piece of cloth out from under an opponent’s legs was extremely simple, but it also was extremely effective against Hinse, as she hadn’t taken full beast form. It wouldn’t have been a problem if the Spirit Summoner had been extremely heavy or running on four legs, but even this childish prank was effective against a human-sized opponent standing on two legs.

There was no need for Konoko to make Hinse completely collapse. All she needed to do was force Hinse off balance. Konoko used that opening to step forward and attack with the weapon she had gripped in her hand: a set of knuckles known as Iron Fists. Having weighted her blow, she attacked the defenseless Hinse.

“Not enough!”

While Hinse had been thrown off-balance, she hadn’t completely fallen over. Taking the form of a beast, she avoided the sneak attack from Konoko by twisting her torso out of the way.

“Ahhh!”

“Yah!”

And as she twisted in midair, she unleashed a kick despite being off-balance. It was far from a fully effective blow, but it was still a kick with the strength of Spirit Summoning behind it. The single hit was more than enough to make Konoko reel back.

Well, yeah... That’s what would happen, right...?

Her ambush had succeeded and her technique had been perfect, but this was still the natural result of fighting a Spirit Summoner, especially one stronger than Sunae. However, even though she had lost after giving her all, Konoko’s expression had a look of satisfaction that Kazuno hadn’t, even as she collapsed to one knee.

They're actually strong enough that we usually wouldn't stand a chance against them... So, this is...okay... Right, Ran?

Konoko found satisfaction in her defeat as she thought of her absent friend. As Hinse looked down at Konoko, she had likewise accepted her victory.

"Thank you."

Konoko hadn't lost on purpose. Had Hinse not counterattacked while avoiding her own blow, she might have landed an effective hit. But even then, Konoko had fought in a way that had helped restore Spirit Summoning's reputation. There was no other way to interpret her actions, given that the Temperan had made the effort to close and attack after her initial trap.

"Yes, indeed... Thank you very much."

It wasn't Magyan Khan who said those words. Instead, having accepted that the matches had ended, the visiting dignitaries, the royals from the surrounding kingdoms, quietly offered their appreciation to the Arcanians.

Deyiaoe Utto, Magyan Toris, and Baigao Shiyoki, who had been present but hadn't actually fought a rematch, also offered their heartfelt praise.

"Lady Happine Batterabbe, I thank you for your thoughtfulness. Not only did you give my daughter a chance for a rematch, but you gave us an opportunity to redeem our Art's reputation."

Happine looked a bit troubled at the fact that the four from Tempera Village had lost and had exposed their lack of ability for the world to see. The one who had thanked her was Donzila Gayaou's father, the king of Donzila. He was the one who had offered them hospitality on their way to the Magyan Kingdom, and he was also the one who they would depend upon for accommodations on their journey back.

"No... They may still have much to learn, but they're still warriors... They were unhappy at having beaten superior opponents through the use of underhanded tactics. That was all this was about, so there is no need to thank us."

"Ah, yes, of course."

"If anything, it's we that owe you thanks... I'm sure this will motivate them in

their future training.”

This set of rematches had helped settle the resentments among the royals of the various countries. While this hadn’t been an exhibition for the masses, it was still an honorable set of fights. They had been held properly and the combatants had fought without obsessing over winning or losing.

There was a great deal of relief that came from the results. While the dignitaries wouldn’t breathe a word about what they had seen this night, the lessons had been carved into their memories.

The Royal Presence and Spirit Summoning aren’t weak... No doubt they’d be powerful even in Arcana.

Knowing that there are opponents like this out there, it was a good lesson about fighting in different states...

The belief that one couldn’t lose as a Divine Beast was a dangerous one... It’s good to learn that...

It wasn’t that everything that they had believed, everything that had been passed down by their forebears, everything that they had built up over successive generations, had been wrong. They weren’t simply big fishes in a small pond who didn’t know about the wider world, but rather lions who had been caught in traps they had only just experienced for the first time.

It was still the result of an embarrassing sort of hubris, but it also wasn’t something to become too demoralized by. At the very least, the results were somewhat reassuring. Of course, that was limited to the four who had fought today. That wasn’t necessarily true of Ran of the Silver Demon Style, who was substantially stronger than even the legends had indicated, nor was it true of the two aces. They were far too powerful; so powerful that it was likely they could defeat everyone present in this room, even if they fought them all together at once.

“Lady Happine, may I ask how it was that you actually brought the legendary Marked to heel?”

“Is there a special Art available to the Arcana Kingdom?”

It was a question that was of particular interest to the royals. Just why was a

Marked following Sunae? Happine took a deep breath before answering the question she had anticipated would be coming her way.

“It’s true that in the Arcana Kingdom, there is a Rare Art called the Hex Arts that inflicts harm on someone according to the terms of an oath. However, that requires the consent of the one placed under the hex. It’s simply an Art that doles out punishments for those who break oaths and it, by itself, is not enough to bring a Marked to heel.”

Zuger was, in fact, the Hex Artist who had sealed that curse, and she could, in fact, demonstrate the Art. But Happine made clear that wasn’t the only reason why Ran had been brought to heel.

“We beat her down until she submitted.”

It was a brute-force method that Happine herself found ridiculous even as she said the words. Of course, her listeners were also initially caught by surprise, but they quickly came to accept the logic.

“Ran was originally as aggressive and dangerous as the Marked in the legends, but she accepted that she was not the strongest after losing to Princess Sunae and Sansui, and accepted the curse that restrained her.”

Ran had behaved arrogantly because she had believed she was the strongest. She had finally accepted her defeat after being repeatedly taught that she wasn’t that strong. It was such a normal line of reasoning to the people from this region of the world that they even found it oddly anticlimactic.

“I see... We had believed that the Marked needed to be killed, but to beat them down and force them to submit... They’re not much different from ordinary strong individuals...”

“Yes. And that wouldn’t harm the authority of the royalty...”

The reason they hadn’t come up with it themselves was because the myth about the founder of Spirit Summoning and the Marked had been too influential in the culture of the region. Happine herself was well aware that those with the talent to become a Marked were dangerous. If anything, given that she had seen Ran as a berserker, she actually considered them more dangerous than the royals present did.

“However, that—”

“—Isn’t particularly easy, is it?” Magyan Khan was the one who finished Happine’s sentence and continued speaking afterward. “The reason Spirit Summoners have a duty to kill the Marked is because they’re a hassle when they escape. Even when trying to bring them to heel, they might very well manage to flee. If that happened, the royals that let the Marked go would be completely at fault.”

The reason Khan had interrupted was to avoid having her directly say that even the kings would struggle to bring the Marked to heel and make them submit. Even if it was true, it would be problematic for Happine to be the one to say so.

“Besides...our method for defeating the Marked... If they learned about it, they could adapt to it. That was exactly why Deyiaoe Utto lost... Even setting aside the Ki Wave technique, a Marked who’s learned from experience is a dangerous opponent.”

With that, Magyan Khan looked over at the silent Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda.

“Sansui Shirokuro... A man so powerful that you can say with certainty that he will win no matter how much the Marked learn and grow... A legendary Immortal, one even greater than the Marked of myth... Just how did you recruit him into your service...?”

“It was a matter of fate, I suppose... I have no way to describe it but as simple luck.”

It was true that House Sepaeda hadn’t employed an enormous amount of effort to recruit Sansui into their service. It had simply been coincidence, and there was no reason for them to be proud of the fact. But that aside, he was still a vassal whom they were proud of.

“Of course, there are things that we’re capable of doing because of Sansui’s existence. Sansui is honest, modest, and a model for other powerful figures. The reason Ran and Lord Saiga are focused on their training rather than arrogantly holding up their own talent is because they have a great goal before them in Sansui. Or, at least, so I have allowed myself to believe...”

Suiboku, the “greatest warrior” that even God himself admitted was an almost absolute force of nature... Sansui Shirokuro, the young Immortal that Suiboku, the ultimate Immortal, had confidently sent out into the mortal world... The Lord Emeritus quietly appreciated just how valuable Sansui was to him and his kingdom.

“I suppose that, in any country, the strongest must also be the most right and proper.”

Magyan Khan was a man who would soon abdicate his throne. Having been bedridden until recently with a deadly ailment, he was thoroughly aware of his own lack of power.

“There are a great number of powerful men and women out in a far-off land we’ve never heard of: the Arcana Kingdom. Just knowing that will change things for us.”

That was true of all of the dignitaries and royals present. While Sukreen had asked during the exhibition just how many decades it would take for outside dangers to threaten the region, it would have been far too late for them if they had only reacted in a panic at the moment when danger came knocking.

No, if anything, they needed to start now, in order to face that danger that was decades into the future.

Part 6 — Separation

As the forbidden rematch, held solely in the presence of the region's nobles, was happening elsewhere in the palace, the princes and princesses of Magyan were all gathered in a single place. Of course, they weren't there to fight over Saiga at this point, but rather to say goodbye to Sunae and Tahlan.

"Brother... You're going off to get married in a distant land..."

"Sunae is one thing, but I'm sad that you're leaving, brother..."

"You'll come back to Magyan again, yes? If not, we'll come visit you."

The younger sisters all clearly regretted that their eldest brother was leaving.

"Hey, big brother... Not that I wanna put it this way, but you won't be bullied or anything in Arcana, right?"

"I mean, I know you're strong, big brother, but...there's all sorts of guys who can beat Spirit Summoners up, right?"

"You're happy there, right? If not, you could just stay..."

Meanwhile, his younger brothers were concerned for their eldest brother's well-being.

"Hey, Sunae. If anything happens, make sure you protect Tahlan. Even if it's at the cost of your life."

"Don't say that, she's going to have a hard enough time not causing him any problems."

"Big sister, no more running away from home, okay? If you do that, we won't let you back into Magyan!"

At the same time, Sunae's sisters were heckling her.

"Yeah, Sunae... You left the kingdom without permission... I heard from Tahlan that you were claiming to be a princess of Magyan over there too, right?"

"Eesh... Don't call yourself a princess when you left without permission..."

Totally embarrassing!”

“Yeah, big sister, that’s terrible!”

And, of course, Sunae’s brothers were lecturing her.

“Grr... Grrmph...”

While she would have been able to fight back had she been talking to Happine or the others, all of her brothers and sisters treating her like a child left Sunae with no room for argument.

“Why doesn’t Tahlan get this kind of treatment...?”

“There’s a world of difference between the girl that ran away from home and our big brother! He left with father’s permission!”

“Yes, you deserve to be scolded.”

There was no trace of the flattery or praise that they had been offering to Saiga until recently. When it came to their siblings, everyone was fully committed and serious in their comments. Still, Sunae understood that they had the right to act this way, so she had no room to argue.

“Setting aside vanity, marrying into a foreign family sounds about right for you.”

“Yeah, even if you’re marrying the wielder of the Legendary Sword Eckesachs, who’s super strong...”

“Yeah, you’ve made a Marked a subordinate... Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

They weren’t looking down on her or mocking her. Rather, they were simply worried about her.

Well, I suppose they have a point...

The really valuable people in life are those who are willing to fret over your well-being. Sunae’s sisters and brothers, looking objectively at her life, were concerned about her future.

In fact, Saiga had been told by Sansui to think more carefully about his life. Sunae herself had lectured Saiga on that exact topic. However, in her siblings’ eyes, Sunae, who was about to marry Saiga, wasn’t much better.

“I’ll be fine! Saiga is a great warrior! Happine and her parents are great nobles! I mean, the fact that they’ve traveled this far should prove that. You understand that, right?”

“Well, no.”

“This is all, well, more about appearances, isn’t it? What about the truth, really?”

“Besides, we can’t trust your word.”

It was true that it was hardly convincing when the daughter who had run away from home insisted that her fiancé was a great man.

“Ha ha ha! Sunae, this is unavoidable. Enjoy being lectured while you still can!”

By contrast, Tahlan, who had maintained a great reputation in this kingdom as well as in Arcana, wasn’t getting anything like Sunae. This was clearly a consequence of the differences in how they presented themselves.

“Tahlan... Perhaps you could say something about Saiga and me...”

“Yes, well... If I’m honest, you’re both still a concern.”

It was because it was accurate information from a trustworthy source that it hit that much harder.

“Figured.”

“Yeah, ahem... True.”

Everyone agreed with Tahlan’s observation. Not because they were agreeing for the sake of agreeing, but rather because his observation matched their own views. If anything, it was precisely because everyone was able to speak their mind so honestly that they were all worthy of trust.

“But that is also true of everyone else. I’m sure she’s nervous about marrying a man who is in the process of being adopted by his other bride’s family. However, once they are in positions of responsibility, blood is a minor matter to consider. What’s important is how they fill their roles and carry out their responsibilities.”

Tahlan was thinking back to the day that he had faced off against Fukei with Saiga and Ran. Even when facing an overwhelmingly powerful opponent, Saiga had been the one to encourage and warn him.

“Saiga still has much to learn, but he’s at a level appropriate to his age. That is why father may treat him harshly, but has yet to abandon him. If he was truly hopeless, no doubt he would have been killed by now. Of course, that’s also true in Sunae’s case.”

“I see. So, that’s how you view Saiga and me, big brother...”

“But that doesn’t change the fact that they’ve still got a lot to learn. Keep up your fretting over them.”

“Big brother,” Sunae began, expression flat.

Tahlan cut her off, responding, “Sunae, it’s said that loyal advice is hard to hear. Of course, calling the words of your brothers and sisters ‘loyal advice’ is perhaps a bit odd, but make sure you listen to them anyway.”

Acceptance of one’s immaturity wasn’t the same as excusing one’s personal failings. If anything, it meant that listening to the advice of people around one was even more important. That was why...when given the right advice, there was no choice but to nod in understanding.

“Heki, nothing from you?”

“Yeah, well,” Heki replied after a moment. He glared at his siblings, particularly those around Sunae.

“It’s true that Sunae did plenty wrong...”

Even Heki’s saying that...

“But during this recent incident, it was Sunae’s skill that put an end to it. So, it’s a bit unfair for us to be lecturing her,” he said firmly, befitting the next king.

“It was true that the timing wasn’t great, given father’s illness, but even then, we should’ve taken care of it all before big brother and Sunae came back. And yet, who solved the problem for us? It was Sunae. She used the man and subordinates she’d found on her travels to settle matters. Do you all have subordinates of that quality?”

Heki sighed in exasperation and embarrassment at his siblings.

“Honestly, by any real logic, Sunae would have the best claim to the throne. Even if she’d destroy the kingdom if she became ruler...”

You don’t have to go that far...

“We should reflect on our own lack of strength before we criticize Sunae, no?” he asked the others. “Sunae, this is going to sound off...but you made the right choice by leaving. You did a lot more for Magyan than your brothers and sisters, who just sat around rotting in the palace.”

“Brother Heki...”

“Of course, it’d have been better if you’d gotten permission.”

“Of course...”

“Of course, there was the whole matter of the First Consort’s wishes, and I doubt father would have let you go that easily, given you had a claim to the throne...”

Tahlan just happened to have the Shadow Aura and lacked the necessary power, but Sunae had the Royal Presence. She had even taught Spirit Summoning techniques to Saiga, an outsider. With that knowledge, letting her out of the kingdom would have been difficult for the king to permit. By extension, letting her leave the region entirely would have been completely out of the question from an official point of view.

“Still, it’s not like you went there looking specifically for those things, and it was more coincidence than anything. I can’t congratulate you for any of it, especially because I don’t want anyone else trying the same thing.”

He makes sure to deny what I’ve done is right...

“But results are results. Your subordinates, especially the man you helped develop and grow, are stronger than anyone here. I hate to admit it, but I never expected you to outdo me like this. I need to raise subordinates that are so strong they won’t lose to yours, and find myself a partner as great as yours.”

Tahlan felt as he watched his younger brother speak that Heki was the sibling that was best suited to shoulder this kingdom and to be the next king. There

was a certain sadness in recognizing this, but it also put him at ease.

“Eventually, we’ll get around to sending a delegation to Arcana so we can embarrass you in your adopted homeland.”

“I’ll do my best to make sure that doesn’t happen,” Tahlan replied after a moment.

That was true of Sunae as well. While she would have preferred a more peaceful homecoming, she would still be able to rest assured that her homeland was in safe hands.

“How strange. This is the second time I’ll be leaving this kingdom as my brothers and sisters bid me farewell... But it’s more painful this time...” Tahlan mused to himself. “Because I have somewhere else I belong, I suppose...”

While he had known it unconsciously from the start, Tahlan realized now that he wasn’t necessary for this kingdom to continue functioning. If anything, the kingdom was better off without him. While he had known all of this in an intellectual sense, this homecoming had reminded him of that fact viscerally.

“Brother...”

Tahlan and Sunae were henceforth to live in a different country. Having once again come to terms with that reality, the siblings all fell quiet, then exchanged handshakes and embraces with the two departing Magyans.

At that moment, Saiga sat with Sansui in the room they had been assigned to.

“Sansui, you’d probably say I should discuss this with my brides, but since I can’t really talk with them about it, I have to ask you instead.”



“What?”

“It really is a big deal to take a daughter from another family as your bride, isn’t it?” Saiga said, making this observation after a short pause, an observation that should have been obvious to both of them.

“Yeah, true.”

There was a sense that it was far too late to be realizing this, but there were things that could truly only be understood through experience, and this was one of them. Saiga had been extremely nervous before their arrival, worried that Sunae’s family wouldn’t approve of him, but the reality that awaited him was even more painful than he could have imagined.

“So, I’ll be marrying Sunae...”

Arcana and Magyan were separated by a vast distance and it was difficult to go from one to the other. As such, Sunae and Tahlan would effectively be breaking free from their families.

“I guess it’s obvious...but I didn’t understand the weight of it... I took it for granted that Sunae and Tahlan would always be nearby...”

“I understand that.”

Sunae and Tahlan had both originally left their homeland of their own free will, and that they were in Arcana had seemed completely natural. Saiga had let himself think that nothing was going to change even though they were both getting married. Of course, the reality was quite different, and that was something that should have been obvious to him from the start.

“Being with Blois had been so natural to me that I didn’t really feel anything when we were first going to get married. But hearing what her parents had gone through...it changed things.”

Sunae and Tahlan were both trying to leave as much in this land as they could. They wanted to make good their debts to their homeland because it was going to be hard for them to come back in the future.

“I realized I didn’t know anything about Sunae...”

“Same. I spent years with Blois, but I didn’t know her at all.”

They were both quite embarrassed. They had only been doing what they had been told to do. Had they actually dealt with their brides and their families properly?

“Sansui... I’m an idiot, so I don’t really know what to do. What do you think?”

“That’s... Honestly, that’s something I want to ask myself...”

Sansui thought about the wife and child he’d left in Arcana.

“The first thing to do is to make them happy.”

“The question is how...”

“I’d like to know the answer to that myself.”

They both possessed incredible power and were close in rank to important people, but they still had much to learn, both as men and as husbands.

Part 7 — Happiness

The people of the Magyan Kingdom were already aware that Magyan Sunae and Magyan Tahlan were going to marry into families in a far-distant land called the Arcana Kingdom. They were also aware that the Arcana Kingdom wasn't just some backwater kingdom that they'd never heard of.

The Arcanians had fought in a royal exhibition against seven princesses, whom the pair's mother Sukreen had gathered from the region, and had beaten all seven of them. As such, the people of Magyan considered Arcana to be a kingdom worthy of Tahlan. There were a number of them who pitied Sukreen and were saddened to learn of the break between mother and son, but they were a small minority.

Magyan Tahlan and Douve Sepaeda, Magyan Sunae and Saiga Mizu... The people were abuzz with the news that there would be a simultaneous wedding for both couples. And on that day...

"So, how do I look?" Douve asked her father and Sansui as she stepped out dressed in a Magyan-style wedding dress. The local style favored thin, half-transparent fabric that looked like it might tear at the slightest touch, all layered into a beautifully complex pattern. The three of them were exchanging pleasantries as they waited for the grand event to start.

"Ahh... You look amazing, Douve..."

"Yes, Lady Douve. It suits you perfectly..."

Such was the simple truth about Douve Sepaeda. Just as she herself believed, she looked good in anything she decided to wear. Even dressed in clothing that was designed for the women of this foreign land, she looked stunning. Her makeup was also perfect, and her beauty would shine through even standing next to a man as handsome as Tahlan. They were going to be quite the stunning pair to look upon.

"Ahh..."

The Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda let out an emotional sigh of appreciation at the sight. His daughter, who had grown into a beautiful woman, was wearing

a gorgeous dress and about to get married. He couldn't help but be moved by the sheer intensity of his emotions. The daughter that he loved deeply—to excess, some would say—was about to be given away to a man from another family. True, that had been the whole point of traveling to this kingdom, but even then, in the moment, he was moved beyond words.

“Indeed...”

Sansui was in a similar state of mind. He had known Douve since she was a child, and indeed felt as though she were his younger sister. Even though he had never wanted to marry her under any circumstances, he was still struck with bittersweet emotion at seeing her beauty.

“Hee hee... Such sad men you are. Despite all your usual gravitas, you're struck dumb by the sight of a single bride... Pitiful, really.”

Her words were barbed, but she was smiling. She appeared extremely happy.

It was then that the man whom Douve, in her current gorgeous state, wanted to be seen by more than anyone in the world stepped into the room.

“Douve...”

Tahlan, dressed in his own finery, walked in with a happy smile. His appearance was such that he stood out as a man amongst boys, a prince amongst paupers. Even Douve found herself at a loss for words when the greatest of men gave her the greatest of smiles.

“Tahlan...”

“Ahh... Heh... This is what they mean when something is described as having an unearthly beauty. It's frustrating that I can't keep you to myself, that I have to let others set their eyes upon you.”

“My, my, I feel the opposite. I'm so very proud to be able to show you off.”

The pair standing there was the platonic ideal of a bride and a groom, the very epitome of what a couple about to be wed should look like.

“Ahem.” The Lord Emeritus coughed, reminding the couple of his presence even as he wiped tears from his eyes. While Douve and Tahlan were the stars of today's show, he still wanted them to actually acknowledge his existence.

“Tahlan... Well, now... While the weather is nice... Indeed, perfect weather for a wedding... Don’t take it for granted and... Ahem...” After going on at some length, the father of the bride bowed his head to the groom. “I leave my daughter in your care.”

“Yes, sir,” Tahlan replied after a brief pause.

It was a common sight that had been repeated countless times around the world, but even then, it was a sign of greatest happiness: The father entrusting his daughter, the groom being entrusted with the daughter, and the bride and the swordsman bearing witness to the whole scene. They were all filled with joy.

The wedding was held in the Magyan palace’s great room, which was covered in an almost excessive number of exquisite, finely crafted rugs. Atop them were cushions of the highest quality, each of which supported a royal hailing from a neighboring kingdom.

The seven princesses who had hoped to marry Tahlan, and who had participated in the Royal Exhibition, were seated among the other guests. They all watched the ceremony with tears coursing down their cheeks.

As flowers showered the room, Heki, the heir to the throne, conducted the ceremony.

Of course, Sunae and Saiga were there as well. As was the custom of the royal family, they were each present in Divine Beast form. Standing as a humanoid lioness and wolf, they were garbed in elaborate wedding attire, but they didn’t feel like they were getting much in the way of attention.

Everyone’s looking at Tahlan and Douve...

Even though he had struggled to learn his Divine Beast form, no one was even looking at Saiga. While that made him a bit sad, Tahlan and Douve made such a beautiful couple that even Saiga had to admit that they were rightly the center of attention. It was enough to make him think, a bit self-deprecatingly, that he and Sunae were just a little bonus.

“Indeed, that’s true. I feel the same way,” Sunae said softly to him. “That is

exactly why you, at the very least, should be focusing on me.”

“Oh, that’s right. Sorry.”

Saiga raised his head. He maintained the form of a giant beast and leaned slightly against Sunae. Happine looked a bit flustered as she watched.

“They’re all very beautiful,” Zuger said with a happy smile.

This prompted Happine to quip, “Hmph, I’m not so rude to say something during a happy celebration,” in an attempt to salve her pride. The truth was that she was incredibly, painfully envious of Sunae. The room was simply just that filled with happiness radiating from everyone within it.

“Magyan Tahlán, Magyan Sunae... My royal siblings,” Heki said as he began the formal ceremony. “My siblings, who depart for a distant land... My wish is that your marriages will be worthy of our ancestral spirits, that you will stand steadfast with your partners, and that you will live without artifice between yourselves and your partners. May the spirits bless the beginning of your new journeys.”

It was at this point that the room erupted in applause. Flower petals danced in the air and music rang out. Each of the guests came up to congratulate the couples on their unions in their own words. There was no more formality left to endure as the guests all celebrated the occasion.

Ran and her friends were also among those celebrating the unions of the two couples. It was at this moment that the Arcana Kingdom’s goals for this journey had been met.

So pretty... I wish His Brotherhood, Blois, and Lain could have been here...
Sansui watched the ceremony through a blur of tears and thought back to his wife and daughter that he had left back in Arcana. He, too, was going to have a wedding ceremony when he returned home.

Chapter 2 — The Clover and the Club

Part 8 — Review

The wedding ceremony in the Magyan Kingdom ended without incident; in the end, it was a bright and joyous occasion representing that each side had done everything they could do for the other and had learned everything they could from the other. Tahlan and Sunae had been able to celebrate and leave their mark upon their homeland, after making certain that they weren't going to leave any problems or resentment in their wake.

They had come home to tell their family that they would be living out their lives in a distant land. Having completed their task, the two felt a different kind of sadness from the sort they had felt when they first departed their homeland. They dwelled upon that feeling as they climbed into their respective carriages.

Meanwhile, the Arcanian members of the delegation had their own thoughts to process as they set off. In particular, the four from Tempera Village and Saiga each had something that weighed heavily on their hearts.

The night before they arrived back in the Arcana Kingdom, the group gathered to talk in a room in the castle they were staying in.

"We've already spoken to Ran about it, but...we intend to return to Tempera Village and complete our training," Yabia said as the representative of the group. She had gracefully won the first match in the Royal Exhibition and shown the strength of the Four Vessels Style in a foreign land, but she looked thoroughly abashed as she told the others of their decision.

"This journey has been a really good learning experience for us in many ways, but we've still got so much to learn, and we're far from being able to fight at Ran's side. And that...has nothing to do with whether or not we have enough fighting experience. It is simply due to our lack of training."

They weren't skilled enough. They hadn't done enough training. Having admitted their weakness, the four looked at the others with pained expressions.

Their talents and family lineages weren't an issue. They hadn't yet put in the work that they could and should put in. Even having acknowledged this, it was still extremely hard to admit that they had simply not been working hard enough.

But their obvious pain was also a sign of their growth. That they were willing to accept the weight of the challenges that awaited them was what also showed just how seriously they would face those challenges and do the work necessary to overcome them.

"The victories we achieved at the Royal Exhibition...were the result of us focusing on winning above all else. Master Suiboku's noble treasures and Eckesachs's tactics were what made them possible... We're happy we were able to be useful to Ran and Sunae, but we would have lost easily if we had fought fairly. If we were to fight without the noble treasures...we wouldn't be anywhere near the level needed to fight at Ran's side."

The four of them had held the masters of Tempera Village, the ones that Ran had so easily defeated, in complete contempt when they had been clinging to Ran's skirts. However, those masters wouldn't have been so badly exposed at the exhibition. They would have been able to win in a fair fight, even without the noble treasures.

Of course, the Drunken Fist Style or the Mist Shadow Style would never be able to defeat a full Divine Beast, but against opponents in humanoid beast form, they would have been able to put up a good fight. And even if they weren't at that level, if they had at least been more mature, if they had put in more effort, then they wouldn't have felt so ashamed at their wins.

"We had originally left the village to communicate our people's wishes to Master Suiboku... Even though we ended up being away for a long time, we would like to return to the village and complete our training."

"I see... Well, if that's what you want to do, then you should do it," the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda said gently. He knew that the four were still far from skilled and that it was up to them to decide how to improve.

If they believed that, rather than learning new techniques, they needed to go back and properly master their original techniques, then it was better that they

return to their village to train. That was true even if they weren't going to be welcomed back with open arms.

"You four are strong. You sought fair battles even when you knew you couldn't win, and now you are going to return to your village where those stronger than you await. I admire that strength. In fact, given that I ran from Spirit Summoning...I even envy you," Tahlan said, praising their decision.

While Tahlan was considered the greatest of the Shadow Summoning swordsmen, the relative power differential between that Art and Spirit Summoning meant he stood no chance against most Spirit Summoners. As he had left his homeland because he couldn't stand that reality, he found the four's willingness to return to a homeland filled with individuals more skilled in their own Arts to be something worthy of admiration.

The four of them were committed and prepared. They were prepared to be humiliated, to be revealed to be frauds, to experience loss, to endure frustration. That determination stemmed from their own weakness and wasn't something to be too proud about. It was the determination and commitment of those who weren't geniuses or masters, but were simply ordinary people. Of course, Tahlan couldn't ever know that feeling.

"I thank you for accompanying me for over a year. Your efforts were invaluable...in foiling my mother's ambitions, and in breaking the arrogance of my homeland," Sunae said, expressing her appreciation. The four of them had won overwhelming victories because their Arts were unknown and because they had utilized specialized tactics, and that had a very real value entirely separate from the shocks delivered by Ran, Saiga, and Sansui's victories.

There was a world of difference between facing a handful of overwhelmingly overpowered individuals and being shown that even an ordinary soldier might be able to kill them with enough determination.

"I have nothing but appreciation for everything you've done, including the fact you were willing to focus solely on winning."

"No... That's not right. It was because we focused on winning, because we received hollow praise, that we understood just how meaningless our wins were. If we had continued riding Ran's coattails...we probably would have felt

this emptiness eventually anyway.”

Each of the four had swiftly and individually defeated a royal in Divine Beast form. Subsequently, the people of the Magyan Kingdom, who had practically deified Spirit Summoners, had regarded them with so much fear that they were viewed with almost as much trepidation as three of the most powerful warriors in the Arcana Kingdom. That was the fear and respect that the four had thirsted for when they joined Ran in leaving the village. In a sense, they had accomplished their initial goal.

To hold one’s head high, to thrust one’s chest out in confidence, and to receive the praises of the people around them... They had thought it would be fun to experience that. But the truth of the matter was different. As it turned out, praise that exceeded one’s actual abilities was empty and embarrassing.

“We shouldn’t have left the village with Ran in the first place, and we should have stayed in Tempera Village when we went back the first time. This journey was meaningful, if only to learn that fact. Even if they treat us coldly when we return... If anything, that might be reassuring.”

The four of them had received confirmation of the importance of strength over victory and were now expressing their determination to become stronger, not simply to just win.

“I’m pulling for you all,” Ran said, but was unable to speak further. Like Tahlan, she found their resolve admirable and envied them for it.

“Yeah, and we’ll work hard. We’ll make sure to train enough that we’re worthy of the praise we got in Magyan...and we’ll be strong enough that we won’t need to depend on noble treasures or schemes!”

“Yeah... I need to work hard too,” Saiga said, having seen the four Temperans now properly motivated. “I spoke to Sunae’s dad while we were in Magyan... He taught me the mindset necessary to be a leader... I’ll make use of it and become a great lord!”

“That’s the spirit, Saiga!”

“Given that your potential has been acknowledged by my father, the king of an entire country, there’s no way you won’t do well as a noble!”

“We’ll also be by your side!”

Happine, Sunae, and Zuger each voiced their support at Saiga’s determination. They, too, had learned from their experiences in the Magyan Kingdom. It was only by supporting the one in charge that they were going to be able to fulfill their roles as the wives of an authority figure.

Meanwhile, Ran was looking at them rather coolly. The other four from Tempera also shared her expression. “Hey, Saiga... This is a bit late to ask this, but do the people actually accept you as the heir?” she asked, putting a rather obvious question that hadn’t been asked until this late moment into words.

Saiga tensed when he heard this spoken out loud. The fact of the matter was that Saiga was almost never in the Batterabbe territories, meaning that he had no idea what the people actually thought about him.

“Hey, that’s a good point... In our village, the main families always received preferential treatment, and we left because we were rebelling against that.”

“Villages and countries aren’t that different, right? Are they really going to let an outsider take control of a big house, no matter how strong he might be?”

“I know that the current lord wants that to happen, but maybe the other people won’t accept it...?”

“Strength isn’t the only thing that matters, right? Saiga...are you sure it’s all going to be okay?”

The Arcana Kingdom was a great power, while Tempera Village was a small community hidden within Arcana’s borders. Even though there was a difference in scale between the two, their social structures weren’t that different. That was why those from Tempera Village considered becoming head of a ruling family to be a big deal. They had thought that the world outside was going to be a lot different from the village before they had seen it with their own eyes, but they had since learned from experience that things weren’t all that different.

“Ahm... Well...”

“There are no problems at all,” the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda answered, cutting off Saiga, who was struggling to answer the question. “Your concerns are completely valid, though. Ordinarily, no one would even consider

making an outsider the head of a house. This is even more the case given that we're talking about House Batterabbe."

House Batterabbe was one of the Four Great Houses of the Arcana Kingdom. Not only was the lord of House Batterabbe ruler over a fifth of the kingdom, they also had authority rivaling the king in matters concerning the kingdom's politics. As such, it had been decided that Saiga would shoulder an enormous responsibility.

"Think about it. It would be one thing if the lord of House Batterabbe was making a foreigner his daughter's consort, but it would be quite another thing if the foreigner was going to become the actual ruling lord. That would be the same in Tempera Village, yes?"

"Yes. There were houses with lots of internal squabbling where the heir that the current head of the house chose wasn't accepted by the others."

"The fact that it's been decided means exactly that. The matter has been decided and all the parties have agreed, regardless of Saiga's concerns."

Yes, the question wasn't worth asking at this point. Saiga wasn't simply one out of a number of candidates to be heir; he *was* the heir. All internal discussions on the matter had already been concluded. However, the root of the Temperans' questions was not that, but rather *why* he had been accepted as the heir.

They knew that strength wasn't enough to be accepted; Ran had proved that to them. No matter how much everyone knew about Ran's strength, no one in Tempera Village wanted to make her head of a house. That shouldn't have been any different when it came to Saiga.

"That's something we've always known, isn't it? It's all to balance against Sansui," Douve said breezily as she looked in the silent Sansui's direction. It seemed Sansui wasn't keen on participating in the conversation, but he made no attempt to deny her claim either.

"The Royal Guard is a collection of the most powerful individuals gathered from all over the Arcana Kingdom to protect the royal family. Their ranks contain numerous men equal to Tahlan in skill, and even the least skilled is at least as strong as Blois. They're the elite of the elite. They're trained in the most

productive environments, given the best equipment, and are trained to fight together well, making them Arcana's ultimate fighting unit. There was one man who single-handedly defeated all of them, the strongest swordsman in the Arcana Kingdom: House Sepaeda's ace and the first ace in the kingdom, Sansui Shirokuro. As such, everything since has been to try to achieve balance with the power of this Immortal."

There were several reasons why none of the houses had proposed putting Ran in charge of their house. First, Tempera Village was a male-dominated society and there was no precedent for a female head of house. Further, her behavior was far too violent, meaning that no one wanted to be near her, much less have her lead them. She was the first of a new bloodline, meaning that her leadership would go against the purpose of the houses, which were there to pass on their house's martial art. Finally, Ran herself had no desire to become head of a family, and showed no interest in doing so. All of those factors combined to make certain that Ran never became head of a house, even though no one in the village was anywhere near her equal in strength.

But there was a decisive difference between Tempera Village and the Arcana Kingdom: Sansui Shirokuro, an absurdly overpowered individual, was serving as the vassal of one of the lords.

"No one can defeat Sansui. No matter how many people went after him, none could inflict so much as a scratch. Sansui...used to serve me. He follows our orders. It is therefore understandable that the other houses became jealous."

"I see..."

Since Ran was the only one of her kind available in Tempera Village, there was no one who wanted to use her as a figurehead or claim her. If one of the houses ended up gaining an overpowered individual in their ranks, then the other houses were naturally going to try to compete. They would have tolerated the fact that she was a woman, that she used a different fighting style, and that she had a bad personality, so long as it gave them a way to compete against the other families.

Indeed, the idea wasn't as implausible as it might have seemed at first glance. At the very least, the Magyan Kingdom, having seen Ran as a docile Marked,

had thought to tame some themselves. When one group gained an overwhelmingly powerful weapon, it was only natural that those around them needed to adapt and evolve.

“The Lord Heir there was brought in with the hope that maybe he’d be able to beat Sansui and was recruited solely for his strength and talent. Which makes me wonder...have you really forgotten that fact?” Douve asked, with a faint note of mockery. Happine and Sunae looked extremely flustered and frustrated but were unable to argue against her logic. It was true that they couldn’t very well hold Saiga up as a great exception when they themselves had forgotten why he had been chosen to be the heir.

“I’m an idiot. I was chosen to be the heir because I have cheat abilities, and yet I let myself think about what it means to lead...” Saiga murmured to himself. He found his previous enthusiasm pointless and idiotic. He had forgotten where he had started and had failed to look at what assumption underlay his position as heir. It was so foolish that he may as well have been a court jester. Douve was perfectly within her rights to mock him.

“That’s right. And you...have the strength to make people believe it.” But the man who had once served as the lord of a Great House wasn’t laughing at him. “As you yourself know, Sansui was stronger than even those around him had thought. So much so that even those who were closest to him didn’t understand the sheer extent of his power. The only time that Sansui ever showed that strength was when he faced his master, Suiboku... Until that moment, we’d never even seen Sansui shed a single drop of blood.”

Suiboku had only recently given Sansui a lesson that involved anything other than practice swings. They had sparred with wooden swords and, in the process, Suiboku had wounded Sansui. Until that moment, Sansui had continually won overwhelming victory after overwhelming victory. Not only had he not taken any wounds, there weren’t even moments where it appeared close to happening. Not only had he defeated his opponents, he always landed his blows as though they were drawing in his strikes. The gap between them was so vast that it made him look boring and plain.

“To become strong enough to make people believe that you might actually defeat Sansui... That’s what was hoped of you. You all should know just how

much struggle and effort that will entail.”

That was something that none of them, not the Temperans, not even Douve, laughed about.

“That’s exactly right...”

Tahlan looked over at Sansui, his teacher. The Immortal was the sole apprentice whom the world’s most powerful man had accepted as a pupil. He was the Young Sword Apostle. A man who had spent four thousand years training had sent him out to the world as his ideal of a swordsman. Just how much effort would it take to make victory seem possible against him?

Tahlan had met Saiga relatively early on his journey, which was why Tahlan knew just how difficult the path for Saiga had been.

“Saiga is strong enough to make those around him think he has a chance of defeating you. Don’t you agree, Master Sansui?”

“Yes, of course. Nothing makes me happier as an instructor...but it’s also time for me to feel a bit of anxiety. I can’t very well stand still.”

Sansui, too, was remembering one of his master’s lessons. One was only a true master by working to avoid being defeated and by competing against one’s apprentices. Saiga had now reached a level where even Sansui himself wondered if he could beat him. It motivated him not to lose at any cost and filled him with the thrill of competition. As a teacher, there was no greater joy.

“I believe Master Suiboku would be pleased as well. Don’t you agree, Eckesachs?”

“Hmph.”

Speaking of the Ultimate Legendary Sword Eckesachs... She was extremely displeased at going unused as of late.

“Listen up, my master! Getting stronger is all well and good, but...make better use of me! Since you drew me, you need to make sure you use me!”

“Oh, yes, of course...”

“You’re the heir to House Batterabbe, but...you’re also my master!” the Ultimate Legendary Sword yelled tearfully at her owner. “Surely you haven’t

forgotten why Suiboku abandoned me, have you?! Now that you're my master, make sure you use me!"

"I'd like to do that too, but...you'll get mad if I use you against weak opponents."

"I won't be mad! It wouldn't count as use!"

"Then that'd be pretty hard... The only ones whom I see as really strong opponents now are people like Fukei or Suiboku... In that sort of situation, I wouldn't win even if I used you."

The heavy weight of reality fell upon Eckesachs. There were walls that simply couldn't be cleared in this world, and Saiga was well aware of that fact. For almost everyone else, Saiga was already on the other side of such a wall. However, even for Saiga, there were walls that couldn't be overcome. For him, that wall was represented by two powerful Immortals, Fukei and Suiboku. They were so far ahead of him that, even if Saiga dedicated his entire life to fighting, he still wouldn't feel like he could defeat them. About the only one who could defeat those two was Shun Ukiyo, the perfect wielder of Pandora.

"My, my, Eckesachs. If you throw tantrums like that, the other Sacred Treasures are going to laugh at you again."

"Hmph!"

"Besides, you'll soon have a use again."

"What does that mean?"

At Douve's meaningful statement, Happine furrowed her brow. At the very least, she couldn't think of any situation that required Eckesachs.

"You're taking father's flattery too much at face value. Think a little bit more carefully. Why do you think we needed that little sideshow in Magyan?"

At those words, Saiga's face paled further.

"Hmph... Douve, rather kind of you to say it out loud."

"It would annoy me to have them call you a liar, father. Besides...it's more fun if they have to struggle with it now, isn't it?"

Saiga repeated Douve's words to himself.

That's right... While it's settled internally that I'm going to become the lord, the people don't support me because I haven't done a single thing to earn that support.

It was quite obvious and went without saying, but the heir needed more than just support from the upper classes. If the heir didn't have the support of the people, he would never be able to actually be the lord.

Lord Saiga...

Zuger watched on with a conflicted expression as Saiga fretted. She looked as though she herself was carrying a heavy burden within her breast.

Part 9 — Displeasure

The delegation's route took them through the southern part of the Arcana Kingdom and into the Batterabbe territories. Obviously, they couldn't simply pass through without stopping in. It would have been completely inexplicable for Happine, the daughter of the current Lord Batterabbe, and Saiga, the heir to the territories, to go straight to the royal capital without even a word. However, that also meant that it was now time for Saiga's character as heir to the house to be put to the test.

What the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda had said wasn't an exaggeration. That Saiga was to inherit the title of House Batterabbe had essentially already been decided. Anyone with sufficient rank to allow them to object had acquiesced to the choice. Unfortunately, all of those people had the luxury of having witnessed Saiga's growth firsthand. For the people of the territories, who didn't know him, Saiga was just a foreigner who had appeared out of nowhere. Now he was going to see just how they'd receive him.

The Batterabbe army's band put on a vibrant, skilled display as they welcomed the delegation into the territory. The musicians had been born to their roles, raised from childhood to learn and play music, having inherited a responsibility that had been passed to them from their fathers and grandfathers. The sheer effort and training behind their playing was obvious even to those who weren't particularly well versed in music. The delegation, returning from success on its great mission, entered the city of Batterabbe, and all of them were in a celebratory and festive mood.

However, the people watching the procession looked coolly upon it. There was a clear difference in enthusiasm between this and when Tahlan had returned to the Magyan Kingdom and its surrounding countries. This, of course, wasn't simply because of the difference in climate. Frankly, no one here knew who Saiga was or anything about him. Since he had spent so much time in the capital, he wasn't well known in the Batterabbe lands.

That sentiment was clearly transmitted to the procession, leaving them little choice but to put on forced smiles as they passed through. Even Sansui, who

was almost completely uninvolved with the business at hand, felt it difficult to be received so icily. As for those who were squarely at the heart of the matter, like Saiga and Happine, they were completely mute as the procession continued.

Even when they had been reunited with Lord Batterabbe after a year's absence, they felt neither the joy of the reunion nor a sense of accomplishment about their mission. Douve, of course, was smirking, but even she was somewhat restrained in her expression.

"First...I'm glad to see you've returned safely. Lord Emeritus, thank you for taking care of my daughter and son-in-law."

"No... I hardly had to do anything. I had no intention of lending them help unless it was particularly serious, and they were able to mostly solve whatever came up on their own."

The Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda was supposed to be a harsh critic, but Saiga and the others were so depressed that the unexpectedly warm sentiments from the Lord Emeritus barely registered. However, Lord Batterabbe showed no sign of sympathy as he looked upon them. Their reception was to be expected, given the circumstances, and the people meant no harm. Furthermore, it was something that Saiga needed to overcome on his own.

"Now...Saiga, Happine. I know you're depressed, but I would like to speak to you. Not as a private individual, but as a noble."

He wasn't yelling, nor was he trying to intimidate them. Instead, Lord Batterabbe simply expressed his serious intent. At his words, Saiga and Happine, along with the uninvited Zuger and Sunae, squared their shoulders and straightened to attention.

"Now that you've returned, I intend to pass my title to you very soon. More precisely, I will likely do so shortly after you and Happine get married... But, as you've noticed, the people don't know you well."

Lord Batterabbe knew that Saiga had contributed to the kingdom and, as far as he was aware, he hadn't tarnished the name of House Batterabbe. However, the problem remained that he simply wasn't well-known. Saiga wasn't going to be a superhero, saving people from the shadows. He was going to be a noble,

governing their lands. He needed to show the people his worth.

“Should I have come to Batterabbe more often? You know, instead of always being in the capital?”

“I don’t know if you could have gotten stronger under those circumstances. It was precisely because you were in the capital that you were able to meet new people and improve yourself. The problem isn’t that you lack worth, it’s just that no one knows you. All that we need to do is show everyone just how worthy you are.”

It wasn’t as though they needed to build up a useless individual from nothing, nor were they required to inflate his reputation with lies and puffery. All they needed to do was show Saiga’s overwhelming power to the masses. The keyword there was *needed*. There was a specific reason it was absolutely necessary to demonstrate his strength to the people.

“It hardly bears repeating that you being made the lord of House Batterabbe is an exception among exceptions. You understand that, right?”

“Of course!”

Saiga had felt the benefits of being a member of House Batterabbe keenly during the recent journey. That was why he had chosen not to settle in Magyan and instead decided to return to the Arcana Kingdom. It had taken him a bit of time to make that decision, but he had done so with an accurate grasp of the situation.

“Y-You sent a delegation...to Magyan...for my sake and for Sunae’s...and I’m very grateful. I know very well that this isn’t a common occurrence!”

“Good, I’m glad to hear that. But...there are many who don’t understand this fact.”

The fact that he was an exception among exceptions meant that there would be no further incidents like this in the future. It meant that they would never make another outsider their lord after Saiga’s accession to the title.

“This is a bit of an awkward way to phrase it, but House Sepaeda’s guiding principle is one of competition. That is why they were able to name Sansui as Douve’s bodyguard, and why there wasn’t much resistance to giving his

students important appointments. But House Batterabbe's guiding principle is tradition. As such, for better or for worse, we don't take risks in choosing people for various roles."

Competition versus tradition... House Sepaeda would immediately strip a vassal of their title if they created problems for them; conversely, they promoted those who accomplished great feats. By contrast, House Batterabbe tended to deal even with great problems relatively calmly, and there wasn't much chance of promotion even for great accomplishments.

"There are those who think well of it, and those who don't. Both of them have misconceptions about you. That you, an outsider, might bring innovation to House Batterabbe."

Some people believed that the new heir of House Batterabbe, someone with a fresh set of ideas, might bring change to the closed, hidebound culture of House Batterabbe. Those who had believed up until that point that they had no room for advancement would feel hope, while those who had felt safe in their positions would feel under threat. It was the first time Saiga had been told that, but it was immediately understandable that others viewed him in that way.

"I-I..."

Saiga was at a loss. Frankly, he had no clear goals that he wanted to accomplish as lord of House Batterabbe. That was why, even when he was told what others thought about him, he had no clear sense of what he should do in response. But, even then, there were things he could say. His time in Magyan had given him a core of experience to build around.

"I...I'm embarrassed to admit it, but I know nothing about governing. Worse, I hadn't even thought about what I wanted to do." He voiced thoughts that were truly shameful to admit. "For someone like me to suddenly jump forward and make a statement here about what I intend to do would be wrong. All I intend is to follow your example, Lord Batterabbe."

And the rest of his statement was also pitiful. It was the sort of statement that betrayed all the hopes set upon the next lord of House Batterabbe by everyone around them. Even so, no one was laughing.

"I'm glad to hear that. While others often don't understand, the lord is simply

the highest-ranking member of the house. They don't have that much authority."

"Yes, of course."

It was rather convincing when the lord himself said it. Since they were going to give the top leadership position to an outsider whose main claim was his strength, it followed that the title didn't have much in the way of dictatorial power.

"Even when you become lord, I'll have you follow my instructions for a while. It may not be polite to admit it, but you'll be my figurehead. As for myself, I intend to continue working with those around me as I've always done."

"No... If I'm honest, that would be easier for me, as well."

As he answered, a particular Japanese man appeared in Saiga's mind.

"Unlike Domino, Batterabbe has good people, doesn't it?"

"That's right. You can depend on them."

Ukyou was a powerful dictator and could decide anything on a whim, but he constantly lamented the lack of ability around him. There was nothing easy about being able to make all the decisions alone.

"Yes, you've definitely grown. The fact that you've gotten to know those who govern, even if you haven't governed yourself, has been a valuable experience. Of course, there are plenty who wouldn't understand that you've grown. That is why they must be taught."

Lord Batterabbe looked to the man who had been focused entirely on blending into the background.

"They have to be taught about the man who is so powerful that he is an exception to our rules."

When House Batterabbe discovered Saiga, they put all of their influence and ability into bringing him into their care, and spent time and money securing him. It was all to have an ace to balance against this man, Sansui Shirokuro. No, that wasn't quite true. They had actually wanted Sansui himself or someone equal to him. *Everyone* wanted someone equal to Sansui.

“As lord, I order you to show the people of Batterabbe that you’re worthy of being my heir. I’ll leave the method to you...but I want you to prove that what we’ve spent on you hasn’t been in vain.”

“I understand! Please leave it to me!” Saiga said, doing his best to answer firmly.

He had taken on the responsibility without any specific plan and without any foundation for his confidence, but he hadn’t taken it on lightly. He knew that he had no choice but to accept. Whatever the process to get here, now that he had been chosen to be the heir to House Batterabbe, acting to secure his claim to the title was his true job.

Since he felt that way so strongly, he was able to say with confidence that he was prepared to do so. Unlike before, his confidence was justified. That was why no one present had any concern about his ability to fulfill the responsibility that he had just taken on.

Part 10 — Discussion

For the time being, Saiga had taken Happine, Zuger, and Sunae with him and left Lord Batterabbe's room. The Temperans knew that this was not their place to interfere and had excused themselves. The members of House Sepaeda left in the room, along with Lord Batterabbe, looked at the door that Saiga and the others had left through.

"It does seem that he really grew during the visit to Magyan. Ordinarily, I should have been the one to guide him...but we had grown too close, and there was no sense of tension. I have nothing but appreciation for the effort your father made."

"No... Father only provided a single clue. It was Saiga, Lady Happine, Lady Zuger, and my sister who figured out the answer on their own. If not for their experiences in the Arcana Kingdom, father's words would not have borne any fruit," Tahlan answered a bit modestly. While there was plenty for the Magyans to thank the Arcanians for, there wasn't much cause for the Arcanians to thank the Magyans. From the Magyan royal family's perspective, they owed nothing but gratitude to the Arcanian leadership. Under those circumstances, having received gratitude himself, Tahlan had no choice but to respond modestly.

"Have you anything to add, father?"

"I have nothing to say to Saiga and the others. All they need to do is review what they did in Magyan. It's impossible that they'd fail at something in their own kingdom when they managed to do it in a foreign land. Considering that they immediately left the room, there's nothing to worry about. What concerns me is..." The Lord Emeritus trailed off, looking sharply at Sansui. "What will actually happen during the main event?"

"I don't know. I intend to do my best," Sansui replied, looking extremely happy despite the sharp glare directed at him.

The Batterabbe territories of the Arcana Kingdom were on the southern side of the country, in a relatively temperate area. It was only a little bit warmer

than the royal capital, and there wasn't a great difference in terms of architecture or fashion. However, there was something there that was clearly different from the other regions in the world. At the very least, such was the case in this particular city.

Lord Batterabbe's daughter and future son-in-law had come to the city where their erstwhile father made his home. Given their age, it was about time for abdication and succession. The issue at hand was the future son-in-law. In Batterabbe, which valued tradition above all else, a foreign man whom no one had ever heard of had been set up to inherit Lord Batterabbe's title. This wasn't simply based on the mad whim of the current lord; that there was no strong, public opposition to it meant that there was widespread agreement among the nobility.

Just how would the people of Batterabbe respond to the fact that the nobles of the territories had unanimously agreed to make an outsider the next Lord Batterabbe? The honest truth was that they weren't sure how to interpret the development themselves. No one had really been able to fully process the news.

Sansui becoming House Sepaeda's Grand Instructor of Warfare made sense, given his strength. It wasn't as though the position came with much authority, so it had nothing to do with the average commoner. It was also substantially different from Princess Setenve's engagement to Ukyou, the president of the Domino Republic. That was a political marriage for the sake of placing Domino under Arcana's influence, meaning it was an ordinary bit of foreign affairs.

However, Saiga's accession would mean an outsider was going to be the actual head of House Batterabbe. It was unavoidable that the news would bring both hope and trepidation.

"It seems he's from a country called Nihon. Evidently, it's far away, even farther than that country called Magyan..."

"Just what sort of country is it? What sort of politics is he going to practice, being from that country?"

"No... I mean, he'll be the lord, but it's just him, right? It'd be one thing if he was going to surround himself with advisors from this Nihon, but he won't be

able to force through things on his own.”

“Yeah, true. I’ve heard House Sepaeda’s lord has a great deal of power, but it’s not that way here in Batterabbe...”

“But all the nobility support him, right? Maybe he’s really charismatic. He might end up turning Batterabbe into another Nihon by convincing everyone he’s right...”

“Just what the heck does turning into another Nihon even mean? We don’t even know what sort of country Nihon is.”

“That’s exactly why the idea’s scary.”

A completely unknown man was going to become lord of the house and most of the common people were anxious about that news. Of course, since the lordship didn’t possess dictatorial powers, the thought of an unknown quantity taking it up wasn’t *too* disturbing. However, under ordinary circumstances, it would have been impossible for Saiga to even think of becoming lord of the house in the first place. As such, the circumstances must be extraordinary. Given that, it wouldn’t be strange for other extraordinary things to happen in his accession’s wake. There were those who found hope in such a future.

“If the new lord is going to start new policies...the most obvious thing would be to get rid of all this tradition, right?”

“Well, yeah, since he’s the one who’s climbed the highest outside of the traditional line of succession. How will he be able to say he supports keeping it in place? He’s gained so much from ignoring it.”

“So, does that mean even a commoner like me can join the army? I’ve always wanted to do it, but I couldn’t because I wasn’t born to the right family...”

“Yeah, tradition means supremacy of bloodline, after all. There’s the option of being adopted by a house, but in almost all cases, they just adopt from another family in the same line of work and of the same rank.”

“Yeah, there’s no hope of change when you live in Batterabbe... But maybe the new lord will fix that.”

“Right... He might open up this closed society we live in...”

Unlike House Sepaeda, where estates changed hands rather frequently, there was a great deal of continuity and stability in House Batterabbe's territories. That wasn't always a good thing. In the Arcana Kingdom, only a handful of people ever achieved advancement, and only a handful of others could ever make their dreams come true. In the Batterabbe lands, there wasn't even that small double handful.

Batterabbe was the land of tradition, where the people weren't able to dream of even the possibility of advancement. The people of Batterabbe generally took the same jobs as their parents and passed them on to their children. That was the only path open to them. While they had the possibility of failing in that endeavor, there were no other alternatives available.

For example, even those who hoped to join the band that welcomed the delegation had no hope, since that had all been decided at birth. In Batterabbe, tradition was the opposite of freedom when it came to one's occupation. There were quite a few young people around the city who were thinking that they now had a chance to break out of that cycle of frustration.

"It's as I thought..."

Saiga, Happine, Zuger, and Sunae had disguised themselves as commoners and gone around listening to the talk around town. While most voiced anxiety about the upcoming change, there were plenty of people who expressed loud hopes that things would change. They hadn't doubted Lord Batterabbe's words, but it was different to hear it from him than to hear the people directly voicing those hopes.

"The future of all these people rests on my shoulders... What a time to realize that."

It was as obvious as anything could be, but the weight he felt was different when he actually heard the tone in their voices. They were thinking that a new, different future was about to arrive. Meanwhile, the truth was that such a thing wasn't going to happen. Instead, everything would stay the same. At the very least, Saiga had no intention of initiating reforms. Despite the fact that he had advanced farther and higher than anyone else, he was going to continue a string of policies that told his people to just follow in their parents' footsteps.

“Everyone’s got their hopes... Even though there’s nothing I can do... Even though I’m just a figurehead...”

They would all be profoundly disappointed when they discovered that everything would stay the same.

“But I still need to do it.”

The answer had been there from the start. No matter what anyone said, he needed to continue the current policies. Saiga understood that doing so was the best way for him to repay his father-in-law for all he had done for him.

“So, I’m going to go out there and, without any shame, make myself the sole exception to the rule...”

He was going to become the highest-ranking member of House Batterabbe and then publicly declare that he was special because he was strong. He would proudly state to the people that he was the only exception, despite knowing full well how unfair it would appear to them. He understood that such was his role.

“Well, because that’s actually how it is. The only reason everyone treats me so well is because I’m overwhelmingly powerful. Which is why I...I need to say as much.”

“Yes, that’s your duty.”

Having been born with the Royal Presence and therefore a claim to the Magyan throne, Sunae had to support Saiga’s bitter decision. She understood there were those who were naturally born into a special class, whether due to bloodline or because they had special powers. A sense of shame about that would have left Magyan or any other country unable to function in any meaningful sense.

No matter what the reasoning, the fact remained that the rulers enjoyed a better standard of living than the commoners, and it was necessary to teach the people that those circumstances existed out of necessity. That, too, was the responsibility of the nobility. Of course, a ruthless ruler who was only blessed in terms of ability rather than character wouldn’t be accepted or forgiven. However, Saiga had a profound sense of shame at being treated as a special exception, and didn’t fall under that category.

“Lord Saiga. I’m not particularly fond of valuing tradition. It’s very sad for people’s lives to be decided by the family they were born to or the talents that they were born with. To throw away what you want to do because of what your family wants is... I can understand the feelings of the people of Batterabbe,” Zuger said, revealing her feelings to Saiga. “However...I don’t think the people who live here in Batterabbe are miserable. Of course, not everyone is happy or living out their dreams, but...I don’t believe it’s so bad that the sacrifices required to change it would be worth it.”

Just as Saiga was acquainted with Ukyou, Zuger was also acquainted with him. She knew just how much blood had been spilled because Ukyou had decided to engage in the great upheaval in the form of a revolution. She also knew that it had been necessary, but she definitely did not think that was the case for this land.

“That’s right, Zuger. Abandoning tradition for competition would cause new complaints and problems of its own. It might very well split the country in half, like what would have happened in Magyan when they tried to make Tahlan king. All that waits after that is a life that’s worse than before the civil war...” Happine said, supporting Zuger’s point. There were certainly quite a few people who were dissatisfied with the principle of tradition. They were fewer in number than those who feared change, but there were more than they could ignore.

However, Batterabbe was more interested in listening to the majority who voiced their anxiety. Not everyone was truly committed to their dreams, not everyone was tired of tradition, and not everyone could accept the sacrifices required by change.

What awaited after all of the change would, in the end, simply resemble House Sepaeda. The changes would simply switch the people voicing the complaints with the people who weren’t, and it was impossible to make everyone happy. Was there a point to trying to make the unhappy people happy if it meant sacrificing the happiness of the people who were content with their lives?

“No matter how well you govern, there will always be complaints. That’s just what we’re listening to right now.”

“However, it’s something we need to hear.”

Saiga and his women were thus experiencing a very hard truth. They had known it would be painful, like placing one’s hand on a pot that they knew was hot. But, even then, there was an important reason for interacting with the people and hearing their hopes for themselves. At the very least, Saiga had been prepared to be burned. His resolve was not only to hurt himself, but the people he loved.

“Zuger, please listen to me,” Saiga said.

Zuger had already guessed what he was about to say. Or rather, she had felt, more than anyone else, what was going to happen.

“Yes, what is it?”

“I’m...going to fight Sansui again.”

In the past, Saiga had faced Sansui three times. Unlike Ran, who had ambushed Sansui, he had challenged Sansui to a duel each time. However, in hindsight, he had been just as serious a headache for Sansui as Ran had. The whole thing had been reckless, dangerous, and meaningless. He had fought Sansui three times and lost three times. Afterward, Zuger had begged Saiga to never fight Sansui again. Saiga had promised, and he kept that promise.

Unfortunately, he had since decided that he needed to break that promise. It was a disloyal thing to do, but neither Sunae nor Happine moved to stop Saiga, nor did they chastise him.

“To prove my strength, I need an appropriate opponent. The best opponent to prove myself is Sansui, the very man I’m supposed to compete against. If I fight Sansui, it’ll show the strength of House Sepaeda’s ace, and the need for me to be part of House Batterabbe as a counterweight.”

The belief that they couldn’t stand losing to House Sepaeda was strong not only among the nobility of House Batterabbe, but the people of the Batterabbe lands as well. It stemmed from their love of their homeland, and also a sense of rivalry. Those who lived in the land called Batterabbe were all united in that belief. If it was found that the lord of House Batterabbe was on equal terms with House Sepaeda’s swordsman, then he would become a hero worthy of

worship.

“I need to play the part of the hero. That is why I’m going to fight Sansui. In front of everyone. Like in the past.”

Saiga was probably making the right choice, and Lord Batterabbe was likely to allow it. Since it gave them an opportunity to show Sansui’s skill, there was no reason for House Sepaeda to reject the proposal.

Unlike the first three duels, this fight had an actual purpose. Zuger understood that. But, even so...

“Lord Saiga, you’re pleased that you get to fight him, aren’t you? There’s a part of you that believes that you can fight him on even terms now, that you can avenge your previous humiliation. Am I wrong?”

Having accepted that the fight was necessary, Zuger now angled to discover the true motivations behind Saiga’s proposal. If so, it would be just like the second time, when he had used all of his Arts at once, and the third time, when he had Eckesachs in his hand. Could Saiga really say that he had no desire to get a measure of revenge for his previous three losses by throwing the weight of several years of training into this? That was what Zuger was asking.

“You aren’t wrong,” Saiga said with all sincerity. “I can’t help but think about it. There’s part of me that’s enjoying this. And...there’s also a part of me that feels guilty for breaking my promise to you. But even then...it needs to be done. So, I need to do it.”

The presence of personal motivations wasn’t important. In fact, it was irrelevant. He would fight because he had to. Saiga wasn’t asking for permission; he was expressing his resolve, even if it was a cruel thing to do to a young woman who simply loved him above all else.

“I don’t believe it was a mistake to ask you never to fight Master Sansui. I believe it was still the right way to go at the time,” Zuger said. She herself was now a woman who could accept those cruel words and process them. “However, at the time, it wasn’t based on wanting to see you do the right thing. I simply asked it of you because I didn’t want to see you hurt again. Those feelings haven’t changed. But if I tied you down, using that promise as a reason...”

“You would be like my mother.” Sunae finished the statement when Zuger hesitated. She brought up the woman who had been willing to split her kingdom in half because she was trying to do what was best for Tahlan.

“Lord Saiga, I agreed to marry you despite knowing you were the heir to House Batterabbe. As such, what I should value most...isn’t myself, or you, but Batterabbe as a whole.”

She had knowingly committed herself to the heir of House Batterabbe. She couldn’t say that she didn’t want what came with that commitment. Just as Saiga had to face the reality of becoming lord of House Batterabbe, Zuger also needed to face the reality of being married to the lord of House Batterabbe.

“You kept your promise to me, and you’ve told me what you intend to do before anyone else. I can’t bear to ask any more of you.”

“Zuger.”

“However, forgive me one selfish wish.”

The Saiga that stood before Zuger was aflame; not with an ideal, not with ambition, but with a sense of duty.

Zuger wrapped her arms tightly around Saiga. “Please...come back safely.”



“Yes, I promise. That, I promise...”

As Zuger fought back tears, Saiga returned her embrace. This looked less like Saiga was about to set out for a duel, and more as though he were going to war. The truth was closer to the latter. It was a completely different matter from his fight with the royals in the Magyan Kingdom. He needed to fight convincingly against Sansui, so that those who might oppose his accession would respect and fear him.

The two knew just how difficult that challenge was going to be. Since Sansui was shouldering the entire weight of House Sepaeda’s reputation, he wasn’t going to hold back. As such, Saiga would be fighting while shouldering the entire weight of House Batterabbe’s reputation on *his* back. It was, in essence, a proxy war between the two houses. That was exactly why it was worth doing.

“Say, Sunae. Have I made Saiga and Zuger...?”

“Don’t say it. It’d be an insult.”

With all that weight shouldered by both combatants, the fourth battle between Sansui and Saiga was about to begin.

Part 11 — The Fourth Time

Just as there was an arena at the academy near the royal capital, there was also a similar facility in Batterabbe. It was capable of seating a large number of spectators, and could host a great many events. Those events ranged from large private shows to public spectacles. While it was a distinguished venue, the events there ordinarily involved sports of one sort or another.

It had been announced that the heir to House Batterabbe would be unveiled in the arena. Further, his presentation was to feature a full slate of guests, with invitations sent to people from every stratum of society. House Sepaeda was also going to be present. Combined with the location, that clued in everyone in Batterabbe as to what was about to take place. Regardless of their social status, all of the spectators sat expectantly in a formal silence in the full arena.

“My beloved people, thank you for coming. Today, I would like to introduce you to my successor.”

The band played a heroic anthem as Saiga and Lord Batterabbe stood side by side on the arena’s main field. Everyone in the stands was focused intently on the pair who stood on what was going to be the dueling ground. They were watching carefully, intent on not missing a single movement, and listening with utmost attention to catch every word. The introductory speech by the heir to House Batterabbe would also be a public declaration of his intentions. Just what did this man from a distant land have in his heart as he was about to take over the house?

“This is Saiga Mizu, the man who will be marrying my daughter. He is the wielder of the Ultimate Legendary Sword Eckesachs, and is the husband of Princess Sunae of the Magyan Kingdom... He is also House Batterabbe’s greatest swordsman,” Lord Batterabbe said, addressing the crowd around him in a loud, ringing voice. Saiga, standing next to him, was tense with anxiety, as might be expected.

The huge crowd seemed to fill every corner of his vision and it was only a small percentage of the total population he was going to govern. Every time he repeated that fact to himself, he felt the sheer weight of the burden he had to

carry. Neither Happine nor Sunae were nearby, and Eckesachs, strapped to his back, wasn't saying a thing. Obviously, he wasn't going to be able to hide in the shadow of his father-in-law.

That was why he was taking the time to recall the relationships in his life. He brought to mind his ties with his fiancées, as well as the warmth of their hands when he held them. At the same time, he thought about his other father-in-law and what Magyan Khan, king of the Magyan Kingdom, had taught him. What the people wanted wasn't Saiga the human being. They wanted Saiga Mizu, the invincible hero. That was why he had to play that part.

“People of Batterabbe... I am Saiga Mizu, the heir to House Batterabbe!”

Playing the role didn't mean he was fooling them. It meant that he was putting all of his effort, all of his dedication, into respecting their needs.

“You have my apology that...I have not shown myself to you until this day.”

The root of the anxiety among the people was the fact that none of them knew Saiga. That was a failing on Saiga's part.

“But that was all necessary. The time for me to stand before you was only when I was ready to become a hero worthy of leading House Batterabbe!”

Saiga thought back to the time between the day he had been chosen to succeed to the title of Lord Batterabbe and today. Those days had been, in all honesty, a series of setbacks and humiliations. He was sincerely glad that he hadn't stepped in front of the people of Batterabbe as the person he had been back on that first day. That time had given him the training and growth he had needed to become the man they needed him to be.

“The man standing before you is one who can protect House Batterabbe! I will inherit House Batterabbe from my father and hand it to the next generation! I am a man worthy of leading a martial house and fulfilling the role of its lord!”

With that statement, Saiga made clear that he would value tradition rather than push for change. He would take over the current structure and pass that to the next generation. While he was a hero, he wouldn't bring change. It was a politic, tame, almost pitiful statement.

“I won’t allow anyone to object to my rule! I will govern these lands with a strength that no one can question or even fully comprehend! To prove this, I will now battle before you! You are my witnesses...and what you see will decide my reputation!”

Saiga had no place to run. If he failed here, even the current Lord Batterabbe’s position might be at risk. Happine, Sunae, and Zuger would also be in a great deal of danger. Saiga needed to show such strength that no one could possibly object to him. He needed to carve into the people’s minds the impression of a power that made them tremble, a power that no one could even jokingly call weak. That meant the fight needed to be an absolute spectacle.

“My opponent...!”

It was at that moment that a giant shadow enveloped the arena. Everything fell into darkness, as though clouds had suddenly filled the sky. The spectators gazed up to see the cause and immediately fell into a shocked silence as they saw numerous giant boulders floating in the air above the arena.

“People of Batterabbe, I greet you.”

A single man jumped off of one of the giant boulders. He landed facing Saiga and drew the wooden sword on his hip.

“I am Sansui Shirokuro, Grand Instructor of Warfare for House Sepaeda.”

Sansui had arrived, along with the giant boulders held aloft with his Immortal Arts. It was a display of power that his master, Suiboku, had once dismissed as an ability unnecessary for mastering the art of swordsmanship and unworthy of a true swordsman. What was the reason he had brought them with him? Was it to show the strength of House Sepaeda? Or was it because he needed them to defeat the current Saiga?

“Lord Saiga Mizu... Prepare yourself.”

Part 12 — Show of Force

This was a level of flashiness quite unlike Sansui's usual demeanor—a clear show of force. Even though they had been informed about it ahead of time, those who knew him were still caught off guard.

“My, my... Sansui's all excited for his little match,” Douve mused to herself. As most of the guests gaped upward at the sky, she smiled proudly as she looked at her former bodyguard. Unlike in the past, when he was completely unable to fight in a visually compelling manner even if he had wanted to, he was now able to use wide-scale techniques of this sort. As Suiboku had taught him, Sansui had grown so rapidly in order that his own apprentices wouldn't catch up to him.

“Does he intend to use those boulders in the fight...? Good work, Sansui,” the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda said, looking on smugly as well. There was no one who dared question Sansui's strength. Just as Saiga had hoped, his opponent's power was clear for everyone to see.

“Saiga...” Lord Batterabbe murmured as he stood next to his heir. He was once again reminded just how big of a threat Sansui could pose to everyone around him. Previously, Lord Batterabbe hadn't had any idea how to even touch Sansui, much less fight or defeat him. It was now apparent that Sansui had grown even stronger. No doubt he'd wield those giant boulders like his own limbs. If that was the case, Lord Batterabbe had no idea what Saiga could even do to stop Sansui.

Sansui, who had been restricted to his wooden sword and Ki Wave up until now, had obtained an offensive power that surpassed human understanding. Even though he was aware that Suiboku still towered above his pupil, Lord Batterabbe couldn't help but wonder just who in the world could possibly defeat Sansui in battle.

“My lord, please step back.”

Despite the fact that none of the spectators were watching him, Saiga stuck to his role.

“Don't embarrass me in front of them,” Lord Batterabbe managed to reply

after a brief pause.

Saiga nodded, saying only, “Leave it to me.”

That was why Lord Batterabbe was able to continue to play *his* role. He keenly understood that Saiga had grown and was now much stronger than he had been in the past. He was aware that he was the small fry in this space, that the ones truly chosen by God were the two who were about to engage in battle. But even then, he continued to play the role of the lord, the role that the people sought from him. He continued to play the ruler who held the reins to a great hero, even in the face of his own powerlessness.

“Let’s go, Eckesachs.” Saiga drew Eckesachs with a serious expression, one without a shred of artifice.

“Yes...!”

Having been drawn by Saiga, Eckesachs couldn’t contain her excitement or nervousness. If she couldn’t prove her worth here, she would truly be without purpose. She needed to show her strength alongside Saiga. If she couldn’t, she would lose her right to call herself the Ultimate Legendary Sword.

“This is a bit out of character, isn’t it, Sansui?” Saiga asked in his usual tone. “I’m told that Master Suiboku once carried around a mountain to use in battle, but he said he stopped doing it because it looked ridiculous. For you, his apprentice, to do something like this...”

“True, it’s out of character. However...”

Sansui thought back to the lectures from his master. He weighed which promise was more important: the promise not to return until Lain was fully grown, or the promise to further strengthen his own apprentices. It was an easy choice. Making his apprentices stronger was far more important.

“I’m really just doing my job, after all.”

“True.”

Yes, that was their job. They were both here to fulfill their responsibilities, and that was why they were facing off for the fourth time. Saiga switched his mind from the anxiety of the pre-fight ceremony to the concentration he

needed in battle. Just as he was about to clear his mind, his precognition triggered, sending him an image.

Huh...?

Saiga was overcome with shock. Even as he understood what was about to happen, he was still caught by surprise. The handful of seconds where his body tensed in confusion guaranteed that the future he had seen would come to fruition.

“Wh-Whooooa!”

A giant chunk of stone, the size of a house, went from floating in the air to immediate free fall, as though someone had cut the rope that held it aloft. The spectators who saw it screamed as they covered their eyes. This was a kinetic attack, one that was impossible to achieve with magic. The projectile accelerated and, with pinpoint accuracy, slammed into the spot where Saiga was standing.

“World Manipulation, Mountain Throwing.”

The name was an exaggeration, of course, as Sansui had only dropped a giant boulder. It was an obvious first blow, one that was clearly meant only to signal that the fight had started. In spite of that fact, the sound it created was immense. The simple act of dropping the boulder was enough to shock the spectators.

Regardless of their station in life, all of the spectators sweated bullets when they saw the attack land, even though it wasn't even directed at them. The projectile was fast enough and massive enough so as to easily punch through a Mystic Wall. Everyone high up in the stands thought that Saiga was dead.

But that was a matter of perspective. Yes, seen from the upper levels of the stands, it looked as though a giant boulder was just jutting out of the dueling ground. But those who were watching the spectacle from ground level were shocked at the impossible sight before them.

“Seriously?! With a single hand...?!”

Holding Eckesachs in his right, Saiga had lifted his left hand over his head. By utilizing both the Four Vessels Style of the Orb Blood and the Silver Demon Style

of the Tainted Blood at the same time, Saiga had easily blocked the greeting Sansui had sent his way.

“It really is out of character, Sansui, for you to use such a careless attack. It caught me off guard.”

Saiga tossed the boulder aside as though brushing dust off of himself. It landed with a giant crash and the perfectly unharmed Saiga stood before the spectators. All of them blinked their eyes in disbelief. He hadn’t dodged it, and it wasn’t as though the boulder had missed. He had simply caught the whole thing. It wasn’t like he was just barely alive or had endured the attack. It hadn’t done a thing to him.

“But you were fine. You were able to deal with the unexpected attack.”

“I feel like you’re grading me on review questions,” Saiga said with a laugh. It was true, in the past, he would’ve been confused by the vision, frozen in place, and likely have been crushed by the boulder. Now, though, he was able to deal with it. He had been caught off guard, even shocked, but he had still been able to deal with it. The spectators had just been watching and were overcome. Meanwhile, Saiga, who had actually taken the attack, hadn’t even worked up a sweat.

“My turn.”

Saiga’s conviction that he was one of the powerful grew. With that conviction flowing through him, Eckesachs lent Saiga more strength. Combining the Silver Demon Style and Fire Magic, he began to run as flames burst out of his back. It was a type of rapid movement that left a flame trail instead of a blur of movement. He was moving so quickly, so impossibly quickly, that an ordinary human’s reflexes wouldn’t be able to keep up enough to allow him to maintain it.

Saiga maintained control without a hint of struggle as he ran across the arena. While Sansui watched calmly from the center of the stage, the spectators were struck speechless by the spectacle. The view from the arena seats had no blind spots. Since they were watching from a distance, they should have been able to follow any movement, no matter how fast. And yet, they weren’t able to follow Saiga as he ran, leaving a giant trail of flames in his wake. That wasn’t simply

because Saiga was moving quickly.

“H-Hey... Something’s wrong! How many of him are there?!”

At some point, the flame trails had multiplied to three in total. The simplest explanation was that there were now three of Saiga on the stage. While usually one might suspect that they were decoys or body doubles, it was hard to imagine that there were two people capable of performing the same feat. In fact, it made more sense to simply think there were three Saigas on the stage.

“Now... Take this!”

He launched a simultaneous attack from three directions using Shadow Summoning and his Shadow Aura. Against an ordinary opponent, moving in even one direction at a third of the speed would have been excessive. It was a simple, ruthless attack executed at lightning velocity. It was so simple that even the ordinary people in the stands saw it coming. But that was all they could do: see it coming. They wouldn’t have been able to do anything in response. Still, it was impossible that Sansui didn’t have some response to that technique.

“Flash Step.”

Saiga had been circling around the outer edge of the fighting stage. In the split second that he was about to turn around to head toward Sansui, who stood in the center of the stage, Sansui teleported next to him with Flash Step and pressed his palm to Saiga.

“Ki Wave.”

It was an almost divine execution of a technique that those who knew Sansui had come to expect from him. The apprentice of the Berserker God had completely read Saiga’s actions, taken advantage of the opening when his opponent changed direction, and got his Ki Wave off in time. Sansui himself wasn’t surprised at the outcome, of course, but neither was Saiga, who had taken the attack, nor were those who knew the two of them.

In fact, Saiga had responded by creating a suit of armor using the Mystic Arts. Since he had been thrown off balance while moving at high speed, the thrust from the Fire Magic had blown him in a random direction, but he hadn’t taken a scratch. Mystic Armor was tough, even tougher still when reinforced with the

power of Eckesachs. Ordinarily, the person inside would have still taken damage from the fall, but since Saiga was using the Silver Demon Style while strengthened by Eckesachs, it had been as though he had just taken a little tumble.

“Hey, did you see what happened?! I couldn’t see a thing...”

“I don’t know what he did, but the Sepaeda swordsman is standing and the heir’s been thrown back. That has to mean the Sepaeda swordsman can throw someone moving that quickly...”

“But, look at that... The heir... He stood up like it was nothing... Despite the fact that he was blasted aside like that, it hasn’t done any damage...”

“Both of them are monsters...”

Those who were watching Saiga and Sansui for the first time were shocked beyond words. This was a battle between those who had been granted power by God, a power that vastly exceeded the standards of this world. It was all too fast to follow with normal human eyes and too ridiculous to understand with a normal human mind, but they still felt shivers of fear running up their spines as their senses were completely overwhelmed.

And it wasn’t just the ordinary people in the audience who felt that way. The soldiers of House Batterabbe whose families had served in the army since time immemorial...even they weren’t certain that they could survive a single exchange between the two. Even those who had accompanied the two to the Magyan Kingdom and had witnessed the Royal Exhibition held in front of Magyan Khan stared wide-eyed in disbelief.

“These...are aces. The power that the martial houses of Batterabbe and Sepaeda have accepted as the ultimate power...”

“So, they really were...holding back...during the Royal Exhibition...”

They had both grown so strong that they could defeat any opponent with overwhelming results. That was why their fights didn’t even have the slightest hint of an exchange of blows. Even when they were holding back, they could defeat their opponents in the blink of an eye. Unless the two fought each other directly, it was impossible to know how strong they were at full strength.

“How many years has it been since that first time? Things are finally going the way you’d hoped, mm?”

Douve and Happine watched the match sitting side by side. They were both deeply moved as they watched the aces that they trusted implicitly battle it out.

“Isn’t that the same for you? Pretty sure you’re thinking it’s finally an interesting match, mm?”

“Yes... He’s finally able to entertain me.”

It was a bit of a misphrasing to say that Sansui had been strong from the very beginning, but he had certainly been overwhelmingly powerful since the moment Douve had met him. By contrast, the Saiga that Happine had first met had been powerless. Since then, he had learned a wide variety of Rare Arts, trained in swordsmanship and tactics, and experienced plenty of actual combat.

It hadn’t been easy for Saiga to overcome all those obstacles during his journey, and he had come close to breaking several times along the way. But he had persevered and overcome those obstacles, and he was now able to put up a fight against Sansui. Almost everyone who was watching was unaware that Saiga had fought Sansui three times in the past and had been instantly defeated each time. There was no need for them to know.

“Haaaa... Raaaaaaah!!!” An inhuman shout roared out from Saiga’s throat. His body expanded and his bone structure changed. He transformed from an ordinary human into a giant wolf. “The secret art of the Magyan royal family... Spirit Summoning! Tremble before its power!”

“Then I shall respond with the Art entrusted to me by Master Suiboku, Immortal of Hanafuda.”

The two, of course, continued to play the part of the hero. That said, no one was actually listening to their remarks. They had all been shocked into silence and were cowering in their seats, trembling at the thought of what might come next. A giant wolf facing off against a swordsman with a wooden sword? They couldn’t imagine what the battle between the two would look like. Their expectation that it would become a battle beyond their wildest imaginations was about to become reality.

“Raaaaaaaah!”

With a roar of defiance, Saiga created a mystical wall of light, building it in the center of the arena. The wall fully enclosed the space around Saiga and Sansui. It was usually impossible for a single mystic to create a wall of this size. Even the ordinary spectators were aware of that, while the mystics in the audience were struck dumb at the sight.

Saiga had crafted the enormous wall with ease, but his goal wasn't to trap Sansui. Rather, it was to prevent any collateral damage from their fight from spilling out into the crowd. In other words, he was preparing for an even more intense battle than they had seen earlier.

“Raaaah... Yaaah!”

The giant wolf started running on four legs. Such was his speed that onlookers lost sight of him after the first step. He accelerated to top speed at an unbelievable rate and completely swept aside the common perception of how quickly an animal could run. Of course, his speed and acceleration vastly increased the potency of his attack. The additional velocity made it nearly impossible to avoid, and the sheer force behind the attack would make countering the attack just as difficult. But Sansui had already prepared his response to this attack.

“World Manipulation, Mountain Throwing.”

One of the levitating boulders was thrown at Saiga at high speed. It was aimed to land directly on the giant wolf as he charged forward at high speed. But just as Sansui was able to read his opponent's movements, Saiga was able to see several seconds into the future. He kicked the boulder hurtling toward him, deflecting it at Sansui.

“Flash Step.”

The redirected boulder missed, of course. Sansui used his Flash Step to move backward, dodging the giant projectile thrown in his direction. Saiga took advantage of Sansui's retreat to pounce. There was no time for Sansui to drop another boulder on Saiga. Even under those circumstances, Sansui remained calm.

“Flash Step Art, Cowherd.” Sansui drew the two boulders already on the ground to him using Flash Step, attempting to use them to block Saiga’s attack.

“Raaaaah!”

But they weren’t nearly enough against this particular opponent. The combination of Saiga’s physical strength and size gained from Spirit Summoning and the hardening of his limbs using the Four Vessels Style was far too much to block with mere stone. His front paw cut through the boulders as though they were made of paper.

“Quicken Self.”

In response, Sansui decided to use a more taxing Immortal Art to enhance his own physical ability. While the boulders had been useless as shields, they had been enough to block Saiga’s line of sight. In the split second the giant wolf required to smash through the boulders, he lost sight of Sansui. As such, even his precognition wasn’t enough to deal with what was going to happen.

“Ki Blade Technique, Cross Touch.”

Sansui imbued his wooden sword with ki and stepped around the boulder shards to reach Saiga’s flank, attempting to land his sword on Saiga’s rear right leg. He was setting up to make use of World Manipulation: Castle Collapse, a technique that would forcibly dislocate Saiga’s limbs. Saiga was already aware of the technique’s existence, as Sansui had used it against a Divine Beast during the Royal Exhibition. It was the technique that Saiga was most wary of in his own Divine Beast form.

“Enough with underestimating me!” the giant Saiga roared as he looked down on Sansui. Even as he did so, another boulder hurtled toward him from above.

“World Manipulation, Mountain Throwing.”

Attacking from above while Saiga’s attention was on his own legs was the epitome of Sansui’s State of No Doubt, making use of split-second opportunities to attack. However, the shadows that emerged from Saiga’s body immediately shattered the boulders.

“I told you, don’t underestimate me!” Saiga slashed at Sansui with his front paw, roaring with rage as the Immortal dropped another boulder in vain.

“Flash Step Art, Weaver Girl.” Sansui swept aside the paw with his wooden sword. The slash from Saiga should have simply snapped the wooden sword, but the advanced Flash Step Art, Weaver Girl, forcibly teleported him as he made contact with the blade.

“You’re more annoying than I remember...” Multiple boulders rained down on the spot where Saiga had been sent. Even Saiga wasn’t able to respond in time to the barrage and took a blow from a boulder the size of his own body. “But this isn’t...nearly enough.”

An ordinary human would have been killed instantly, but Saiga was a complete Divine Beast. His augmented form made him extremely durable, and his power was enhanced by Eckesachs. A boulder, even one launched from high in the air, wasn’t a threat to him.

“You’re out of boulders, right? You’re not so persistent that you’d refloat them. I imagine you’re trying to increase the number of visual obstacles, but...”

The spectators trembled as they watched the Divine Beast be completely unaffected by the boulders. So far as they could see, the boulder had hit him squarely and he hadn’t been able to block it. And yet, Saiga had casually kicked it aside and stood back up. He appeared to them to be a monster from a different world, a monster that completely surpassed the limits of human understanding.

That was why they missed the fact that the paw prints that Saiga had left on the ground had changed color. They weren’t able to notice, despite the fact that they were in plain sight. They were far too mesmerized by the beast fighting in front of them.

“Can you dodge this?”

Bursting Venom Style, powered by the Seeping Blood, came into play. The ground that Saiga’s front and rear legs had touched exploded with enormous force. While the spectators were protected by the mystical wall, Saiga himself and Sansui had no way of avoiding the concussive force. The explosions were at a strength that Saiga himself could withstand, but they were far more powerful than what Sansui, who was essentially unarmored, could endure.

The explosions weren’t mere firecrackers in the enclosed space. Even if they

weren't strong enough to pierce the wall of light, it was enough to send a cloud of dust billowing out from the opening at the top of the wall. The dust rained down upon the spectators, but none of them complained. Everyone was too transfixed upon the smoke-filled interior of the wall of light.

Sansui had avoided every attack to this point, but even he wouldn't have been able to respond to these explosions. Moreover, if there was no room to dodge, then the only thing he could do was try to endure them.

Just as the spectators watched in expectant silence, the wall of light suddenly vanished. The wind quickly cleared the smoke away and Saiga, back in his human form, appeared from within. He was quite dirty, but he was also unharmed. Meanwhile, there was no sign of Sansui.

"Can you see where Sansui went?"

"No."

Douve and her father were unable to find Sansui. They were certain that he had survived the explosion. They knew he was alive, that he had avoided the attack, and that he would appear unscathed.

The only one in the world who could harm Sansui was his master, Suiboku. But Saiga had grown strong enough to plant the smallest seed of doubt in their minds.

"I'm sure he's all right," Zuger said, mostly for their benefit. It wasn't that she had grasped the exchange of blows between the two, but there was one thing that she could say with conviction. "Lord Saiga isn't fighting to humiliate Master Sansui."

Saiga wasn't going to let his passions get the better of him, nor would he make the wrong decision. It was because she believed in him that she was able to say it with such confidence.

And just as Zuger had stated, Sansui appeared from the sky unscathed. He came down riding one of the boulders, none of which had remained aloft prior to the explosion. The boulder landed with a great crash and everyone's attention immediately went to the Immortal. Everyone present saw Sansui was unharmed.

“Even if I couldn’t hurt you, I’d hoped to at least get some dust on you.”

“Ah, as for that, I dusted myself off in the air. That’s why I was a bit late.”

Had he wanted to, Saiga could have created a wall of light that covered not only the sides, but also sealed off the top. But the reason he hadn’t done so was to give a path for the explosive blasts to escape and to give Sansui a way out of the explosion.

The moment Saiga had triggered the Bursting Venom Style explosions, Sansui had used Flash Step to move atop a boulder. He then used Feather Step to lighten the boulder and make it levitate. When the blast rushed upward out of the walled space, the boulder, now light as a feather, was thrown aloft by the rush of air. In effect, Sansui had used the boulder to ride the blasts from the explosions.

He had dispersed the energy from the explosions by going along with their force rather than trying to withstand them. In the process, the boulder he was riding had been blasted far into the air, but Sansui himself, sheltering atop it, had come away without a scratch.

“Shall we continue?”

“Yes!”

Eckesachs blazed with light as Saiga held her in a ready stance. This wasn’t because Saiga had imbued her with flame magic, but because of the sheer strength of Saiga’s spirit.

Saiga had learned of Suiboku, a man so powerful that he could never reach him. He was still struggling to deal with Sansui, Suiboku’s pupil, and yet his confidence remained unwavering. He hadn’t been this mentally strong at the start. It was because he had worked hard and trained hard to get to this point that his mind and heart were filled with confidence.

Saiga had grown truly strong as a warrior. He had the strength and the character to respect his opponent, to be confident in his own ability, without needing to bring down or diminish his opponent in exchange.

“Allow me a moment, then.”

Sansui took the moment to take the Golden Balm. While it was a minor change compared to Saiga's transformation into a Divine Beast, Sansui thus increased his own physical abilities by making his body into that of an adult. The Immortal instructor was smiling as he turned back to face Saiga, his pupil. His smile conveyed his unalloyed pleasure. Sansui, more than anyone else, was overjoyed at Saiga's growth as a warrior.

"Here I come."

Saiga dashed forward. He had removed almost all of his physical enhancements and challenged the kingdom's greatest swordsman with just his blazing sword. Sansui, too, responded without using Flash Step, his only Immortal Art use coming from a slight amount of physical enhancement.

The two swordsmen began exchanging blows in a dance of blades. But watching that sight, the audience couldn't help but be befuddled. Just how long was this battle going to last? It had become an enormous battle of Rare Arts techniques, but even though the two were fighting at full strength, it was still clear they weren't so desperate that they were putting everything on the line.

Despite the fact that they had each been using enormously powerful Rare Art techniques, neither of them appeared injured or tired. There was no sense that they were running out of techniques or strength. They showed all who were watching that they had no limits, no end to their strength, as they continued to exchange blows in the arena.

Lord Batterabbe was moved as he watched the exchange. "So very well done, Saiga." His expression was of a father overjoyed at seeing his own child's growth. It was a pure joy devoid of any artifice or political calculation. There were plenty of people in the world who had put in as much effort as Saiga. But they couldn't, wouldn't, achieve his level of strength with that effort.

Saiga truly was one of the chosen few. Even then, Lord Batterabbe was celebrating the work, the effort that Saiga had put in.

Part 13 — Remaining Duties

Whatever doubt had been in the minds of the people of House Batterabbe had been settled by the match between Saiga and Sansui. Just as House Sepaeda had Sansui Shirokuro as their ace, House Batterabbe had Saiga Mizu. The Arcana Kingdom was blessed to have these two overwhelming warriors at its disposal. Having witnessed the overwhelming strength of both warriors, the people understood why they had been given such generous treatment by their patrons. They weren't simply unusual foreigners who had been promoted as a sideshow, but rather they had been given positions worthy of their strength.

Saiga Mizu was so powerful that the normally conservative House Batterabbe was willing to make an exception to its traditional practice and make him heir to avoid losing him to another house. Saiga had so thoroughly imprinted his strength into their minds that there would be no more whispers of reform or rebellion. To go against his stated wishes of continuing House Batterabbe's policy of traditionalism would mean having to fight Saiga himself. No one dared risk his wrath.

The higher-born members of Batterabbe society saw how quickly the popular perception of Saiga had changed. All of them, particularly those who held high expectations of Saiga, were proud of just how much he had grown into a worthy successor.

"I'm extremely pleased that your reputation now fits your ability. There's no one left in these lands who doubts your strength... No, there's probably no one left anywhere who doubts your strength. I'm sure even Master Suiboku would happily praise your growth."

After the match, Lord Batterabbe had invited Saiga, Happine, Sunae, and Zuger to his private chambers. The four of them could only sit and fidget as they listened to the man who had held the highest hopes for Saiga offer his heartfelt praise.

"This means you're now an heir to the house whom the people can accept."

"That's...not quite accurate, I think."

No one, not even Saiga himself, could say with any certainty that he would be worthy to rule House Batterabbe. The match had simply been a demonstration of his power; it had, in the end, only ensured that everyone was afraid of him. That fear, rather than acceptance of his worthiness, was why no one would dare question Saiga's promotion or the fact that he was an exception to Batterabbe tradition.

"I don't think it was a mistake for me to train at the capital or for me to go on the journey to Magyan. However, that's also why...I'd like to stay in Batterabbe from here on out."

The people of Batterabbe now understood Saiga's strength, but Saiga himself knew nothing about the people or the land. At the very least, he was certain no one wanted a leader whose rule was founded solely on demonstrations of power.

"All I've done...is crush dissent. That's a solid accomplishment, but not enough to make me worthy to be your successor."

"I'm going to warn you... It's not going to be easy."

"Yes, but I won't have to shoulder it alone," Saiga said as he smiled. "If there's something that annoys me, I'll have Happine listen to my complaints. If I get discouraged, I'll have Sunae encourage me. If I'm about to make the wrong choice, I'll have Zuger chastise me. So...I'll be fine."

Lord Batterabbe wept with joy as he looked upon the worthy heirs to his lands. Not Saiga alone, but all four of them: Saiga and his three wives. "I'm glad to hear that, but...you still have work to do in the capital. Once you've finished that, come back here... There will be plenty to keep you busy by then."

The one task remaining for Saiga at the capital was something he had already done in Magyan.

"Make sure it's all done properly... This wedding ceremony will bind three couples together: you and Happine, Princess Setenve and Ukyou, and Lady Douve and Prince Tahlan. That's your last duty in the capital..."

Chapter 3 — Family Reunion

Part 14 — Good News

Now, we return to me, Sansui Shirokuro. After finishing the exhibition in the Batterabbe lands, we're now making our way to the royal capital. Since our group has also been assigned to serve as a diplomatic delegation, we now need to report to His Majesty the King.

While the various treasures made with the Immortal Arts and given to us by my master had been effectively free, the value of the other gifts we had carried to Magyan and the cost of employing all the members of the delegation all added up to a substantial sum. Since the royal family shouldered part of that expense, it would be problematic if we forgot to pay our respects on our return.

Personally, I'd prefer to just pass by the capital and get back to the Sepaeda territories as soon as possible. Unlike Lady Douve, who got to travel with Tahlan, and Saiga, who was accompanied by Happine, Sunae, and Zuger, I still have Blois and Lain waiting for me at the Wynne family estate. It's been over a year, and I really want to go and see them as soon as possible. I'm sure Blois, Lain, and the others feel the same way.

I'm no longer Lady Douve's bodyguard, so I don't actually have any official responsibility to accompany them to the capital, but I'm also not comfortable leaving my direct superior behind and going home without them. It would be nice if there was something that demanded my immediate attention, but unfortunately, I'm not that busy. Had any of my students caused problems while I was out of the kingdom, I might have had a plausible reason to hurry off to the Sepaeda territories, but fortunately, nothing of that sort had occurred, so there's nothing urgent on my docket. Of course, it's actually great that my students are approaching their jobs so seriously. It's my own thinking that's the real problem. I just need to wait a little longer and then I'll have a lot of free time.

That thought gives me the strength to carry on a bit longer. I'll see my family soon.

However, a single piece of good news quickly overturns those plans. Surprisingly, over the last year, Blois had been pregnant and had already given birth to our child.

"Father, Douve, Tahlan. I've been on pins and needles waiting for your return. I'm very glad to see you returned from the long journey looking so well," His Brotherhood says, greeting us at the House Sepaeda estate near the capital. I expect him to say something to Lady Douve or Tahlan, but he looks in my direction instead.

"I'm sure there's plenty to discuss, but first... There's something I need to tell you, Sansui."

His Brotherhood starts not by addressing his father, sister, or brother-in-law, but me, his subordinate. He's not someone who usually opens a conversation this way, so all four of us are caught by surprise, even as his next words clear up the matter.

"After you left Arcana, we found out that Blois was pregnant."

I suck in a breath of surprise. As I sat there in the carriage, trundling toward Magyan, Blois had been dealing with a serious development. It's happy news, but pregnancy carries risks of complications and danger, so I'm also quite anxious.

"S-So... Is Blois all right?"

"I haven't seen her in person, but I'm told she safely gave birth. Both mother and child are doing well."

His Brotherhood's words blast away my anxiety, and my profound relief supersedes any joy I might otherwise feel.

"I see... Both mother and child are doing well... I'm so glad to hear it."

"Why can't you look a little happier?"

However, Lady Douve seems to be extremely displeased about my reaction. I

suppose she's unhappy that I don't look overjoyed. Tahlan and His Fathership, on the other hand, seem to empathize with me.

"Well, listen, Douve. It's not my place to say it, but I think Sansui looks plenty happy."

"Douve, Master Sansui is extremely happy. Surely you're aware by now that he's not the sort to make elaborate expressions of emotion."

The two of them have placed themselves in the shoes of a man who has just found out about his wife's pregnancy well after she's already given birth. At the same time, Lady Douve is still unmoved by their words.

"You really are...a boring man."

"My apologies."

"I feel so bad for Blois and Lain... I'm not sure such a boring man should be a father. Don't you agree, father?"

"Y-Yes."

Please don't use His Fathership and His Brothership as a baseline for comparison for my behavior. I mean, I agree that they are both, at a glance, extremely emotional, expressive, and interesting people, but even so.

"Blois is your wife and Lain is your daughter. But to me, the two of them are like my younger sisters. I can't help but feel sorry for them that they're stuck with such a terrible father," Lady Douve says, expressing her exasperation. She truly pities Blois and Lain. Am I really that bad...?

"Sansui, I understand where you are coming from. It's a common difference between men and women. Don't let it bother you," His Fathership says sympathetically. It's as though he's reflecting back on when he heard similar complaints in his own life.

"Well, yes, you do have a point on that difference, but that is exactly why it's worth listening to. Master Sansui, as Douve says, women do think about how we react. Simple honesty isn't enough to get your emotions across." Meanwhile, Tahlan offers me advice. His insights are always really helpful. Sometimes it's easy to forget that I'm older than him.

“True... I’m sure Blois has given up on various things, but Lain has many expectations of you, so try to be a little more thoughtful, mm?” With that, Lady Douve smiles gently and turns to look at His Brotherhood and His Fatherhood. “So... If I end up having Tahlan’s child...”

“What?!”

“You rogue! We haven’t conducted the ceremony in Arcana yet!”

I wish they would drop it already. Their reactions make me wonder why we even bothered to go all the way to Magyan.

“I hope to see a reaction that’s so over the top and different from your usual impassive expression that it seems exaggerated.”

“I see... Yes, that’s important. I’ll bear that in mind.”

“Yes, I look forward to it.”

Lady Douve and Tahlan’s interactions are lovely to watch. I suppose this is what a successful marriage looks like. Still, to want a reaction that’s so over the top it seems like an intentional exaggeration... Really?

“At any rate, just play the role of a happy fool. That’s how you show your commitment. Don’t pass it off as being too mature to give an emotional reaction like you usually do.”

Acting too mature to react... Is that really what I’ve been doing all this time? I mean, I appreciate Lady Douve’s words, but I’m not sure what she’s saying is actually all that applicable.

“So, Sansui. You can set aside your work and go to Blois’s side.”

“Are you certain?” I reflexively ask about His Brotherhood’s offer. It’s true that I’m practically ready to hop out of the door right now, but I wasn’t expecting him to go out of his way to give me permission.

“I have no intention of telling you to stay here after giving you news of your child’s birth. There’s nothing in particular that you need to do here, so of course I’m happy to send you back to your family.”

His words really are generous and I find myself tearing up.

“Oh, before you head to the Wynne family estate, stop by the main Sepaeda manor. I’ve had them prepare formal clothing for you, so pick it up before you head home. I doubt it’ll be much of a detour for you.”

“Formal clothing?” I ask with some trepidation.

“Yes. Show off a bit for Blois, Lain, and your new child.”

I really find it hard not to cry at his thoughtfulness. Seeing my expression, Lady Douve, His Fathership, and Tahlán all look quite pleased. I somehow manage to keep a level voice and respond as I’m enveloped by the affectionate warmth in the room. “You honor me more than I deserve. I shall accept your generous offer and return to the Sepaeda lands!”

I bow my head multiple times as I leave the estate. That done, I quickly dash off, leaving the capital far behind me. I’m going to meet my wife, my daughter, and my new baby. I feel my heart skip a beat inside my chest as I’m filled with an expectant joy I’ve never felt before.

Part 15 — Special Order

Having been relieved of duty for the time being, I'm traveling along the road from the capital to the main Sepaeda estate, using Feather Step to jump ahead. You might think that lightening my body with Feather Step would leave me vulnerable to getting blown off-course by the wind, but Immortals are in close harmony with the air, so I can ignore crosswinds and simply make use of the following wind. You can think of it as ignoring any air resistance and hopping along the road. Now, if I were to combine this with Quicken Self, I could travel much faster. However, unlike Feather Step, Quicken Self burns a lot of ki, so I'm refraining from using it for the time being.

The nice thing about being an Immortal is that I can ignore air resistance and run in a straight line toward my destination without worrying about things like terrain. Moreover, I can keep running constantly without rest. There are no negative effects from not eating or drinking, and if I want to, I can also go without sleep. I also don't get lost while running at night, and I'm unaffected by wind, rain, and snow. Heat and cold aren't a problem either. Lately, Saiga and Ran's cheat abilities have tended to draw all the attention, but Immortals cheat plenty too.

Even as I'm thinking highly of myself and Immortals in general, I can't quite get rid of the trepidation I'm feeling. I have to meet with a group of people who've had to deal with my cheats over the years. They've spent years thinking I was in my teens, only to find out I'm in my five-hundreds. I'm sure that made them throw their hands up in exasperation.

Thanks to my master's teachings, my thoughts don't affect my Immortal Arts or physical fighting abilities. Even so, I feel like my stride is a little heavier than usual.

I arrive at the main Sepaeda estate sooner than I expect because I've run the entire distance without any rest or sleep. At the estate, there are a lot of craftsmen who have taken care of me over the years. While House Sepaeda believes in fierce, constant competition, they do have professionals that they

keep on retainer. Typically, they rotate them out every once in a while by holding contests and the like, but these individuals haven't been moved in the last ten years or so. As such, the same craftsmen have been making all of my clothes and wooden swords for the last few years.

"Master Sansui, it's good to see you again," the middle-aged gentleman wearing a monocle says to me with an air of faintly irate formality. This is House Sepaeda's chief tailor. Technically, I'm now a noble, and as such, I now outrank him. Still, that's not enough to change his perception of me.

"Then, if we can begin... Can you please put on the formal suit for the wedding?"

"Y-Yes, of course..."

The clothes set out for me are a pair of white formal suits cut in the style of a military dress uniform. For some reason, each is different in size. Oh, I see, that's in case I decide to take the Golden Balm before or not. I'm pretty sure I told them that my clothes also grow along with me when I use the Immortal Arts, but I guess this is a point of professional pride for him. I try on the smaller suit first, and he looks at me resentfully.

"Impressive. Perfect as always."

"Yes, a perfect fit... Without a single change for over seven years... Not a single need for adjustment," he observes with a touch of acerbity.

Well, yes, of course, since I'm an Immortal. Then again, I hadn't told anyone that I was actually five hundred years old until Eckesachs revealed to everyone that Immortals don't actually age. As such, the fact that my body measurements hadn't changed in the slightest for the entire time he's known me must have been a question that had eaten away at him over the years.

"Then can you please take the Golden Balm or whatever it is? After you take off the suit, of course."

"O-Of course..."

"It makes such a mockery of us tailors," the tailor says with indignation as he helps me undress. I can see a burning resentment in his eyes, clearly the result of me not having changed at all. "As you might be aware, clothing is something

that is altered as an individual grows. I have crafted new clothing for both Lady Douve and Lady Blois as they grew older.”

“Y-Yes...”

“As a tailor, I often see my clients unclothed. So, I had suspected...for a long time...that there was something off about you. Yes, indeed!”

“I-I see...”

“How pointless it was for me to think of new patterns and designs for you to wear to go along with your growth!”

His rage is driven by the fact that his skills and care as a craftsman have been rather completely rejected as meaningless. As a swordsman, I can understand caring about the details of one’s craft. As I consider that, having stripped down to my underwear, I take the Golden Balm. My loincloth remains snug and perfectly adapted to my size as I grow into my adult size. That sight further irritates the tailor.

“What is it with you?! First, I find you don’t age at all! Then, I find out that when you grow, your clothing grows along with you! Are you mocking me and my craft?!”

“M-My apologies...”

Even in his rage, he manages to accurately measure my body. I’m sure he’s checking to see if anything has changed since my journey to Magyan. Nothing has, of course.

“I’m sure that from your perspective, having spent five hundred years training with your sword, I’m a mere child! I haven’t even lived a hundred years! But still, I’ve spent thirty years of my life working as a tailor! For the last seven years, I have been forced to make nothing but simple clothing, something even an amateur could make! I wasn’t able to make any changes or innovations! It was a direct challenge to my pride as a tailor!”

“M-My apologies.”

He dresses me even as he rants. Yes, it all fits perfectly.

“I have pride as House Sepaeda’s on-call tailor! I’m one of the three best

tailors in all of Arcana! My skills are enough to deal with any order that comes my way! And yet...to be told to make such simple clothing... They really did make me question my whole vocation as a tailor!"

I'm sorry, but can you please say that to His Brotherhood, His Fatherhood, and Lady Douve instead of me? The reason I continue to wear that simple clothing isn't by my own choice. It's House Sepaeda's policy. Though, okay, the part about growing and the like is my fault.

Having picked up my formal clothing, I then make my way to House Sepaeda's chief swordsmith. He's the craftsman who makes Blois's rapiers and my wooden swords, and he's done a good deal of work for me over the years.

"So, listen...Master Sansui. I'm proud of the swords I make."

Like the tailor, the swordsmith is himself now on a bit of a rant.

"I-I see..."

"I clawed my way to the top among the sea of swordsmiths that serve House Sepaeda. I have always been proud of the fact that the elites of House Sepaeda, the great martial house, use the swords I make."

"Y-Yes... I think that's very impressive."

The swordsmith's hand balls up into a fist as he talks. He looks about ready to punch me.

"I'm choosy about who gets to buy my swords. After all, I'm House Sepaeda's swordsmith. I make the best swords in the kingdom. I don't want anyone short of a royal guardsman or a paladin using them. No, I won't let anyone short of the most elite use anything I make."

"I-I see..."

"Great swords are for great swordsmen. Even the greatest sword is useless in unskilled hands... But I...! But I...!"

He, like the tailor, looks really resentful.

"I only end up making wooden swords for the kingdom's greatest swordsman! What the hell is that all about?!"

“I-I’m sorry!”

“What pisses me off is that you really are the best in the kingdom, whether you’re using a wooden sword, a bludgeon, a sword you grabbed from your enemy, a rusty sword, or whatever! You use them all perfectly! Just what the hell do you think us weaponsmiths are here for?!”

He goes on a rant that reminds me of something Eckesachs was saying. True, I don’t really care about what sword I’m using. I don’t even need it to be a wooden sword; I can just use a random stick.

“It was seven years ago! I was told to bring not just Lady Blois’s rapier, but wooden swords and a bunch of other swords to the Sepaeda estate! That’s when I first met you, you bastard!”

He grabs me by the collar as he swears at me. But, but, I’m a noble...

“You remember that, right?! The old Lord Sepaeda gathered a hundred soldiers who were condemned to death by military tribunal and had you test swords on them! He ordered you to use the swords as roughly as possible, remember?! I was there too!”

“Y-Yes! I remember!”

“I was going to stop you from swinging the sword you picked up because the grip hadn’t been designed for a brat like you! Imagine my surprise when I see you kill the first ten men with a sword you were wielding for the first time! A brat younger than my own son, slaughtering ten trained soldiers using a sword he’d just picked up for the first time! I still remember the sheer power of your bladework!”

“Y-Yes...”

“You kept wielding it effectively even when you crushed a skull through a helmet and broke it in half! You adjusted to the shorter length and kept killing them! You left the old lord and me just staring in shock... You could use any sword effectively, regardless of whether it was chipped or broken, because you just accounted for the damage. It was amazing to watch the condemned soldiers go from cocky and mocking to pale and terrified.”

Oh, right, I remember that... Moreover, I remember reading a novel with a

main character who'd talk frankly like this regardless of whom he was dealing with. I let my thoughts wander in that direction as this energetic craftsman rants in front of me. I understand what he's feeling, but...well, there's not a lot to be done about it.

"The ultimate swordsman, who can use any sword, however big and heavy, or small and light. I thought hard about what sort of sword to make for you after seeing you fight..."

"I-I really appreciate the great wooden swords you provide me with..."

"You son of a bitch!"

Sure, a cunning mason can work with any stone, but he'll still dream of marble while he's carving granite. I guess I've grown the same kind of frustration in the swordsmith.

"No, no, they're much better-crafted than the ones that I make... I've spent five hundred years making wooden swords, but I haven't gotten any better... So, I'm always impressed..."

"Are you mocking me, dammit?! Blast it all! You! You and your master! You don't really care, do you?!" He shakes me back and forth. He's really scaring me. "I saw the swords your master made! They were actually pretty decent swords! Even though they're made of stone!"

"Yeah, I was surprised too. I didn't know my master had that sort of skill..."

"Your master! Can make decent swords! And yet only! Taught you how to make half-assed wooden swords! That's exactly what I mean about making a mockery of craftsmen!"

Well, to summarize, my master's progression went from "Noble treasure swords are strong," to "I'll go learn how to make them myself," then to "Since the swords I make break quickly, I want one that won't break," followed by "I got Eckesachs!" Then, after that, "Relying on Eckesachs is making me weaker," and thus concluding with "You know, a stick is good enough to kill people, isn't it?"

As such, he never really had any reason to teach me how to make a sword properly. It seems the swordsmith understands this, which is part of why he's so

angry.

“If you’re the strongest swordsman, at least care a bit more about what tools you’re using!”

“I-I-I am! The wooden swords you make are of a much greater quality than...”

“Of course I make them with as much effort and care as possible! Do you understand how I feel? How I poured my heart and soul, my thoughts and experience, into crafting swords that I care for like my own children... Then you come by and tell me you would prefer just to use a wooden sword! Do you know how angry and frustrated I was when I heard that?! What the hell are swordsmiths even for?!”

“Th-There are times I need to stop people without killing them... So, the wooden swords are more...”

“Do you understand how I feel when a patron comes in and asks for the same sword that the most powerful swordsman wields?! Do you have...any idea... What. It. Feels. Like?! To have to point them over at the wooden swords?! You couldn’t possibly understand, could you?!”

I suppose this is part of wanting to become the strongest: looking up to the most powerful swordsman and trying to copy them in appearance in order to get a little bit closer to them. Since I’m copying my master, I can understand what that’s like. The problem for everyone involved is that the most powerful swordsman in this kingdom is a boy who wields a simple wooden sword.

“Do you know how disappointed they look when I point to the wooden swords?! Do you know how many times that’s happened?! Well?!”

My master and I have mastered the “sword” to such an extent that we have no preferences when it comes to swords as actual physical objects. Since we have Ki Blade and Leaden Step, we don’t even need it to be a wooden sword. You know, I once showed off to Saiga and lectured him about what it meant to really use a sword, but...it seems that sort of thing is an unforgivable insult to this swordsmith.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

“You’ve finally...FINALLY! Ordered a proper sword, you son of a bitch! Why

couldn't you have done it years ago?! Or rather, do it from the very start!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

"I've made a combat-worthy sword to go along with the ceremonial sword!
Make sure you use it, you bastard!"

At this particular moment, this swordsmith is the very model of a "Light Novel Protagonist (Technology Skill Type)."

Part 16 — Surplice

It's a common trope in comedy that someone dresses up in really nice clothes for a date only to end up getting them all dirty through a series of random accidents. Since this actually does happen in real life and that experience is something people at every level of society can identify with, it's a trope that happens in this world too. Yes, it even applies to me.

I've finally acquired the clothes I wanted, in the local style, and I also have a ceremonial sword to wear with it. I'm sure my wife and daughter will be pleased to see me in that outfit, but I don't make the fatal mistake of wearing it on my journey to the Wynne family estate. Instead, I take the formal suit off and put my kimono back on as I make my way from the Sepaeda estate to the Wynne estate.

Of course, I'm carrying the formal suit and ceremonial sword in a waterproof pack. In this outfit, thinking about it, I really look like a teenage peasant wearing a really simple outfit. Yes, my robes are made of pretty fine cloth, but it's not enough to offset just how simple my attire is. For that boy to be running around with a bundle filled with expensive clothes and a ceremonial sword... Well, the kind of person I most resemble is a thief running with his booty. Still, this is a necessary evil to avoid the wrath of the trope.

Besides, I'm running at high speed, so it'd be hard for anyone to catch me. Furthermore, I'm currently in Sepaeda territory, which is basically my homeland. If someone saw a black-haired boy clearly using a Rare Art to move quickly, I'm pretty sure they would just accept that it's the Young Sword Apostle running around. Even if I was to be stopped at a roadside checkpoint, His Fathership has given me a free travel pass, so it wouldn't be a problem in the slightest.

It's a bit of an exaggeration to say that I can act as arrogantly in these lands as Happine does in the Batterabbe lands, but...I do have a fair bit of leeway here in Sepaeda. Although I'd been in the capital lately, I'd spent about five years here in Sepaeda, so I'm pretty well known.

"Ahh, I can finally see the Wynne estate."

Since I can already detect Blois and Lain's presence, I could simply use a single Flash Step to arrive at the front gate of the estate. Unfortunately, I'm currently dressed in my kimono and have my wooden sword on my hip. I may not be wearing a laurel wreath or be decked in honors, but I do have a nice formal outfit now. If I'm honest, there's a part of me that wants to show it off, so I decide to look for a spot to change.

I make my way to a nearby stream to wash. Since I'm an Immortal, I don't really emit much in the way of bodily fluids or waste, but given that I've been running all the way from the capital, I'm a bit dusty. Once I finish washing off, I take a Golden Balm and begin dressing. Honestly, I'm not really someone who cares a whole lot about my appearance, but having a nice set of formal clothes made just for me is kind of exciting.

When I was living with my master, I needed to make my own clothes, so I was fine with the simple kimono. However, when I started living in Arcana, a medieval European-esque culture, I definitely felt a bit isolated being dressed as I was, like some pauper from medieval Japan. I understand why Lady Douve, His Fathership, and His Brothership like dressing me in a distinct outfit to show off the fact that they have a foreign Rare Art user in their service. Still, when I think about it that way, it really isn't fair that Saiga gets to dress normally and I don't...

"Tsk, tsk. I'm still immature."

I take a moment to check on my appearance. The clothing is cut in a military style and the sword on my hip is fancy and decorated as a ceremonial piece. I'm also in my adult form after taking the Golden Balm. Now that I'm prepared, I take a moment to practice a few lines.

Being properly dressed, I then make my way to the front entrance of the Wynne estate. Since the Wynnes are nobles, there are guards positioned at the gate. However, this is my wife's family home and I'm properly dressed, so I decide to go speak to the guards to let me in. I let myself think briefly that they might flatter me about my new outfit, but their reaction is completely different from what I'm expecting.

"Hello, thank you for your hard—"

“Hold it! Who the heck are you?”

“You look pretty properly dressed, but...we hadn’t received any word that someone like you was coming!”

I am stunned into silence. They shoot me down the very moment I call over to them. It seems the guards simply don’t recognize me.

“Ahem, I’m...”

“I don’t know who you are, but this is the Wynne family estate! Don’t think you can get in without an appointment!”

“That’s right, that’s right! This is a house connected to Lord Sansui Shirokuro, House Sepaeda’s First Swordsman and Supreme Combat Instructor!”

Sorry, that’s me. Yeah, I suppose this makes sense. Thinking about it, they can’t tell it’s me at a glance, and I hadn’t actually sent any messages ahead. If the guards were to just let me through without identification, they would be completely neglecting their duties.

“I’ll come back later,” I say after I recover my wits.

“Don’t show your face again!”

“Not if you don’t want to face the strength of House Sepaeda and its ace!”

Like I said, that’s me. Still, it’s pointless to argue, so I retreat from the gate for the moment. I mean, if I wanted to, I could easily put the guards down. Really, there’s no need for me to actually step through the gate. I could just float over it.

I’m technically a noble now, though, so I can’t really just ignore the guards. They’re just doing their jobs at my wife’s family estate. Still, I can’t help but be hurt by their reaction.

At any rate, I need to restart this. I return to the spot where I changed earlier, wait for the Golden Balm technique to wear off, put my kimono on, and then hang my wooden sword from my sash. Now, no matter who looks, they’ll be able to recognize me. I end up having to put the formal suit back into the bundle; since the ceremonial sword doesn’t match my kimono, I put it away as well. There’s something a little humiliating about all this, but they can’t mistake

me for anyone else now. With all that done, I make my way back to the Wynne family estate.

“Pardon me, my name is Sansui Shirokuro...”

“Oh! Lord Sansui!”

“Welcome back!”

Back in my usual clothes, the guards at the gate recognize me instantly. I mean, this is completely understandable, but I can't help but feel a bit conflicted about the outcome. I have to wonder whether it's right that everyone's popular conception of me is as a poorly-dressed boy with a wooden sword. Still, it's not like there are that many men who are dressed like me with black hair and black eyes. I think there was some story about the opposite, where they couldn't tell that Ikkyu was the real priest because he was so nondescript, but I suppose I shouldn't get too deep into that rabbit hole.

“Are you aware of Lady Blois?”

“Or, rather, Lady Shirokuro...”

“Y-Yes. I've heard both mother and child are doing well.”

“Yes. His Lordship is also overjoyed!”

“And Miss Lain is taking good care of her sister!”

It seems they're happy to see me. Still...there's a feeling I can't describe, something about all this that's hard to accept. I suppose Ikkyu felt the same way... However, it'd be a bit too cruel to look proudly at them and reveal that they had chased me off earlier. It's not like they tried to hurt me or anything...

“I'm sure you're tired from your long trip from Magyan!”

“Please, come on inside! We'll go ahead and inform the estate, so please take your time.”

Since they seem to sincerely respect and admire me, I can't really say anything to them about the earlier incident. But why do I have to feel this way? All I wanted to do was dress up a little and return to my wife's family home in style. It may not be showing in my expression, but this feeling itself is a sign of my own immaturity.

It's no one's fault... Yes, no one is at fault. Not the tailor, not the swordsmith, not the guards. None of them are at fault.

"Th-Then I'll be on my way..."

And so I end up heading to the room where Blois and Lain are waiting in my usual clothes. I thought about stopping to change, but one of the guards had decided to come with me. In fact, he's holding the package with my formal suit and ceremonial sword for me. This is what they mean when they say a small kindness can cause a much bigger mess...

When I enter the room, I see a clear look of disappointment on both Blois's and Lain's faces. As expected, they were hoping that I'd look different from usual. I'm sorry to disappoint them, but I make excuses internally that I tried my best.

Blois has a bit of resignation to her, as though to say "I suppose I should expect this of Sansui," but Lain, who is a fair bit bigger than when I left, is clearly displeased at my appearance.



“Hey! Papa! Why did you come back dressed like that?! We know they had really nice clothes for you ready at Lady Douve’s house!”

“L-Lain... I mean, all Sansui’s done is come home in his usual outfit... Ahem, yes... Sansui, I’m not disappointed at all.”

“That’s not true! Mama Blois was looking forward to seeing you in a suit too!”

“Well, yes... At the very least, I’d hoped you’d at least take the Golden Balm before coming over...”

“You really are insensitive, papa!”

My daughter, whom I’ve just now seen for the first time in over a year, holds nothing back. The criticism hurts... I guess this is what they mean by a “rebellious phase”...

I remain silent. I think an apology from me will settle everything. I mean, part of me can’t quite accept that, but it’s not like anyone is actually at fault...

“Y-Yeah. I’m sorry, both of you...”

I’m the only one who knows everything that happened, so if I stay quiet, it can all just be my fault. I’m the oldest here...and it’s not like I want to lecture anybody... But you know, I’m a little annoyed that the guard who’s carrying my package behind me is looking at the scene like he’s watching a heartwarming family reunion.

“Come on now, Lain... It looks like he has some souvenirs...”

“I didn’t want souvenirs! I wanted Papa to be dressed up!”

“Don’t say that... Here, let me have that.”

Anyway, Blois takes the package from the guard.

“S-So, what’s in here...?”

“I don’t care!”

“Hm? Clothes and swords?”

Oh dear, she’s opened it up in front of the guard. The guard looks at the contents and tilts his head quizzically. Yes, those are the clothes that the

suspicious figure he chased off earlier was wearing...

“Th-Those...are the clothes I’m going to wear at the wedding... They’re not souvenirs or anything. I’m sorry.”

“N-No, don’t worry about it. I see, so you can wear clothes like...”

“Why didn’t you wear that when you came home?!”

Blois looks a little happy about the prospect, but the color has completely drained from the guard’s face. What should I do? The fact that the guard is here has completely ruined my attempt to keep the truth quiet...

“S-Sorry... But you know, I can’t really risk them getting dirty, right?”

“Whatever! Go put it on!”

After I take the Golden Balm and put the formal suit and ceremonial sword on, Blois and Lain proceed to welcome me with open arms. For myself, I can’t help but look over at the guard who carried my luggage here. He looks about ready to hang himself.

What should I do? He didn’t do anything wrong... How did it end up like this? I guess it’s just a bad thing to try to change my appearance. At least, that’s the lesson I’m going to take from this.

Part 17 — First Meeting

“I see... Why didn’t you just say so?”

“No, no... I have no interest in being pushy...”

Blois was curious why the guard’s face was so pale, so I ended up having to explain what happened. As Blois says, maybe I should have just said outright that I was Sansui Shirokuro and that I was transformed. Personally, I don’t think that would have worked. I mean, I actually *know* full well they wouldn’t have believed me...

“I mean, you and Lain know that I can grow using the Golden Balm, and since you know my face well, you can tell who I am even when I’m grown up, but... Well, do you think your family’s guards know me that well?”

Since this world doesn’t have photographs, the only way to record a person’s face is with something like a portrait. Further, it’s not as though the guards at the Wynne family estate have ever taken a close look at my portrait. Since they only know me in my teenage state, if they saw me with another five or six years added on, I don’t think they would have ever recognized me as Blois’s husband. I mean, really, it’d actually be scarier if a simple gate guard at the Wynne estate knew everything about me: that I’m an ageless Immortal, that I can grow using the Golden Balm, and that I have new formal clothes for a wedding ceremony.

“Besides, there would be no end to it if someone claimed they had transformed using a Rare Art.”

“I suppose that’s true... That does let anyone make outrageous claims.”

Or rather, if I end up being pushy and argumentative, I’ll just interrupt the work of the guards, which would cause problems for the Wynne family too. I mean, my body returns to normal when the Golden Balm wears off, which is why I decided to retreat in the first place...

Thinking more carefully about events, I think my assumption that they’d just let me through after taking the Golden Balm was a mistake. As His Fathership, His Brothership, and Lady Douve intended, everyone recognizes me as the boy in a kimono with a wooden sword. And in this world, without a conscious effort

to get people to know you by reputation, it's hard to get them to remember what you look like.

"The best thing to do would have been to get in through the gate in my normal state, then take the Golden Balm and change into the suit. I mean, then I could've gone and seen the two of you."

"True... Do that from now on."

I guess the thought of seeing Blois and Lain again after so long made me a little giddy and careless. It was complete immaturity on my part. I still need more training. That said, I'm pretty sure my own master can't really handle this sort of thing properly either. I doubt I'll be able to solve the problem with more sword training or more experience with the Immortal Arts.

"Who cares about that?!" Lain, who's still in quite a state of agitation, complains even as Blois and I reflect on my mistakes. I mean, true, she's probably right, but since Blois and I worked together for so long, whenever there's a problem, we end up trying to talk it out in order to find a solution. I guess that's part of the reason why Blois and I aren't very interesting to Lady Douve.

"That's true... Ah, well, Sansui... Welcome home."

"Yeah, I'm glad to be home."

Oh, wait! No, I can't just return that greeting like that. Tahlan went to the trouble of giving me advice and I need to follow it or Lain's going to yell at me again.

"Ahem... Ahem, Blois."

"Wh-What is it?"

"I'm really happy to see you after so long... I missed you so much."

"O-Ohhh...!"

Dressed in my formal suit, I embrace Blois, who is dressed like a proper noble lady. Blois is sitting in a chair, so I make her float with Feather Step before pulling her to me. Blois's reaction is so shy, really, it doesn't seem all that different from before her pregnancy...

Well, she looks like she's happy and she's embracing me back, so I think it's all working out well. Besides, Lain looks really pleased.

"Y-Yes...yes...*sniff...sniff...*"

"I'm glad to see you looking so well..."

"Th-Thanks... I'm also...happy to see you're all right..."

Yeah, we've been apart for over a year. I had been off on a long journey to a distant land as a bodyguard while Blois dealt with the hard work of being pregnant. It wouldn't have been that big of a deal in my old homeland, but we'd had no contact at all, whether by voice or by letter, over the last year.

Blois is crying as she holds me, and Lain is crying as she sits primly in her chair. Yeah, I get it... It's understandable that they're both crying. For better or for worse, I'm ready to die at any moment, so my emotions aren't as prone to swings as theirs are, but even then, I can understand what they're feeling. Yes, I'm really glad they're both doing well.

"Right now, Lady Douve and His Fathership... Er, hang on... Lady Magyan and the Lord Emeritus...are at the capital. I ran ahead of them back to Sepaeda, and...they told me to take my time and enjoy some time with my family."

"I see... I'm grateful for that."

Blois straightens in her chair and wipes her tears. As a martial house, House Sepaeda requires that its retainers undertake hard missions, but they're also good about rewarding us when we're done with those missions. Having time to spend with my family is probably the best reward they could have given me.

"Hey, hey, papa. Are you going to wear those clothes and be a grown-up for the wedding ceremony with Mama Blois?"

"This is the outfit I'm supposed to wear at the ceremony for Lady Douve and the others, but that's probably what will end up happening... I'm sure they'll let me show off a little at my own wedding."

"G-Good... I'm so glad... I was honestly worried... Without the Golden Balm, I'm taller than you..."

"That's right... You've both grown so much..."

It has been almost seven years since I hopped over the carriage with Lady Douve and Blois on it while carrying Lain in my arms. I suppose it really is true that life passes by in the blink of an eye. Not that my life ever actually blinks, I guess.

“No, you’ve grown too, papa! I’m so proud of you, papa!”

“Yes, you’ve gotten bigger, Sansui.”

“Well, this is all due to medicine...”

Can you really call it growth when I’m only in adult form because of the Golden Balm that my master made with the Immortal Arts? There’s no getting around the fact that it’s just doping. Should I really be happy about people praising the growth that I acquired through doping?

“Anyway, it seems our wedding is going to be held in Sepaeda. That means all the details are going to be handled by the Wynne family.”

“True... Father says that’ll be his last big responsibility as Lord Wynne. After that, Hetter will inherit the title.”

“Okay... I’m looking forward to Lady Douve’s wedding!”

I still remember Lady Douve as a child, and part of me still thinks of her as one, but she’s getting married... I guess life really does go by in an instant.

“So, how was Lady Douve? Did the king of Magyan say anything to her...?”

“Prince Tahlan’s father gave his blessing to the union. Unfortunately, Tahlan also ended up pretty much needing to cut ties with his mother.”

I don’t go into specifics, but the pair seem to read between the lines. It’s not really much of a surprise that Tahlan’s mother objected to such a perfect prince marrying into a foreign land’s noble family, or that she stubbornly wanted to keep him in Magyan. Still, I doubt either of them thinks that Sukreen, Tahlan and Sunae’s mother, was willing to go as far as to plan a rebellion.

“I see... Well, they’re royals. Such things happen. So, did Lady Douve seem bored on the journey?”

“Well, Prince Tahlan was with her, so...she seemed to really be enjoying herself, even during the six-month carriage journey.”

“Prince Tahlan really is remarkable...”

“Yeah, amazing...”

Blois, Lain, and I are all well acquainted with Lady Douve’s impatience and dislike of boredom. Even when we traveled within Arcana, she proposed getting attacked by bandits because she was bored. I suppose part of that is because Blois and I were boring bodyguards, at least by her standards, but even then, it was quite a feat to have kept her entertained for a journey that took a whole year.

“That, and on the way back, there was still the afterglow of the wedding ceremony they held in Magyan. Both of them were really enjoying the feeling of being newlyweds. So, what about you two? Weren’t you bored just waiting out here?”

“Well, your students, the ones working as instructors in Sepaeda, came to visit pretty regularly. That, and Master Suiboku would occasionally look in to check up on me. I honestly didn’t feel all that much boredom.”

I’m sure my students all came from relatively close by, but wow, my master really is traveling all over the place now. Maybe he’s actually enjoying interacting with the mortal world for the first time in ages. After all, he did spend fifteen hundred years in that forest. Thinking back on it, that would mean my first conversation with him, five hundred years ago, would have been the first conversation he’d had in over a thousand years, so...

“Everyone was really nice, papa!”

“It’s all thanks to your character... I really do have a wonderful husband. I didn’t have much in the way of connections, myself...”

“Don’t say that, Blois. You did your duty, you protected your family, and you protected Lady Douve from harm for all those years.”

Since Blois and I had been Lady Douve’s only bodyguards, Blois hadn’t been able to make friends or get to know anyone else through her work. There’s no helping that she doesn’t have a particularly wide social circle.

“Oh, that reminds me, Mama Blois’s teacher came to visit.”

“Yeah, he was grumbling about you. Only when Lain was out of earshot, though.”

“Your teacher...? Oh, ah... The top swordsman from before I came along, right?”

Obviously, Blois has a teacher who taught her swordsmanship and magic. Since she had been tasked with protecting the daughter of House Sepaeda, her teacher was House Sepaeda’s best swordsman, naturally. He had been pretty old already when I first met him, but even at his age, he was at least equal to the Royal Guardsmen in strength.

“Yes, that’s the one. The one you beat in a match and then dismissed after he begged to receive instruction from you.”

“Oh, I didn’t know about that...”

“Well, you were still really little, Lain... But it really was a shock to me at the time.”

Blois’s teacher really was strong. His magic and his rapier skills were both first-rate. Then again... Seven years ago, my Flash Step and swordsmanship were already at my master’s level, so there was no way I was going to lose.

“Can you imagine it, Lain...? The great teacher who had raised me and made me strong, the person I probably admired most in the world? Can you imagine how I felt when that teacher lost to Sansui, who didn’t look much older than me, and then the teacher kowtowed to him and begged for instruction?”

“Papa, that’s awful!”

Not to toot my own horn, but unlike Saiga, who’s shown a great deal of growth lately, I was already so skilled that my master told me before I left the forest that I would be strong enough to claim to be the greatest in the land. There was no way I was going to lose to anyone other than Fukei or Pandora’s perfect wielder, but...since Blois didn’t know how old I was at the time, well... She got really upset after that little incident happened.

“You rejected my teacher’s plea for instruction because you said your master hadn’t given you permission to take on apprentices. My teacher had to take you at your word and give up, but then you suddenly started taking random thugs

from around the land as your students. Well, you can see why he was really angry. Evidently, Master Suiboku gave him some instruction afterward to make up for it, but...”

Wow, my master really is doing a lot of things... Maybe he’s actually got nothing else to do? Anyway, this conversation really makes me feel like I’ve come home. It really makes me feel...relaxed, or safe, something like that...

We sit in a companionable and pleasant silence. However, Blois and Lain look as though there’s something they’ve forgotten that’s bothering them.

“What is it?”

“It just feels...”

“I don’t know. Like...we’re forgetting something.”

“The baby?”

I check with the two about what I detected earlier, the small presence inside the estate. It prompts a quick response from both.

“That’s right! Papa and Mama Blois’s baby! I completely forgot!”

“Oh dear, we had that whole incident with the guard, so...I ended up putting it off...”

Wait, what? I’d been looking forward to this for a while... Well, I guess I can understand Blois’s reaction. After all, her husband, who had been away for over a year, came home and immediately ended up causing trouble because he was trying to be tactful. It’s understandable that dealing with that threw all other potential considerations out the window.

“I’m sorry, I was a bit caught up in the joy of suddenly seeing you again.”

Maybe I should have sent a message ahead to let them know I was coming. Actually, yes, I should have done the normal thing and sent a message two or three days ago, and then come back riding in a House Sepaeda carriage. The guards would have let me through the gates without any problems at that point, while Blois and Lain probably would have welcomed me with the baby in their arms.

I mean, I did what I did driven by a desire to be home as quickly as possible,

but I guess haste really does make waste. Most things work better when you just do the normal thing. Tahlan mentioned that Master Suiboku's teachings apply just as much to relationships between men and women, and I guess this is probably what he meant. Just putting on the appearance of propriety with the clothes and the Golden Balm isn't enough to have things go smoothly.

"We can spend a little more time talking if you want..."

"No, no, go and see her. As soon as possible!"

"That's right, papa! Go show her your face! You're her papa!"

That's right, I'm a papa now that my child has been born. Wait, no, I've been a papa since I adopted Lain, I guess.

So, I'm finally going to meet my own child in person. Wait, no, that makes it sound like Lain isn't my daughter. Let's just rephrase that: I'm going to meet the baby. At any rate, I go and lay eyes on the baby for the first time. She's a few months old, old enough that I can distinguish her facial features. Well, that makes sense. It took me a year to get to and from Magyan, and I spent about six months there, so if she was born ten months after I left, she'd be about eight months old now. So, yes, that explains why she's so big.

"I hate to phrase it like this but...she doesn't look anything like you... And since she has mana, there really isn't anything to prove that she's yours..." Blois says worriedly, and I can understand why she's a little nervous. For the mother, she can prove it's her child because she gave birth to it, but that's not true for the father. Meaning, Blois is afraid that...people might suspect she was unfaithful while I was away.

Now, we can prove that we're related using Dainsleif, but... Well, I have no intention of doing anything of the sort. Even I, with my relative lack of social skills, know what I'm supposed to say right here. Yes, I shouldn't lie and say, "No, no, she looks just like me," and obviously, "Don't worry about that," is completely out of the question. I've known Blois for a long time, so I know what I need to say at this moment.

"Blois... I'm sure giving birth for the first time was hard. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

“Sansui...”

“Thank you for giving birth to such a healthy girl. I’m really happy.”

“Sniff...”

She ends up crying again, but not in a bad way. I embrace her as she sheds tears of relief.

“Yeah, she really does look just like you, Blois.”

She’s still a baby, but as Blois says, there’s nothing about her that looks like me. As she lies there in her crib and Lain gently pokes at her cheek, I note that her hair and eye color are exactly the same as Blois’s. I have to admit, I’m a little sad to not see any of my features on her.

“Hee hee hee, papa, I’m a big sister now!”

“Yes, yes you are...”

A thought crosses my mind as I look at Lain proudly smiling up at me. Whom will this baby end up marrying? She’s still a baby, but even I know it’s going to be an issue. I don’t care so long as she’s healthy, but she is a girl. As such, I end up wondering what sort of person she’ll end up marrying.

“What is it, Sansui? Why do you look so troubled when you look at your daughter?”

“Well... I was wondering what sort of marriage partner we need to prepare for her.”

“Oh, come on... It’s a bit early to think about that.”

“No, not at all. I’m told these things are sometimes decided before birth, and since I’m a noble now, I figure I need to take that seriously.”

It’s probably because of Lady Douve’s wedding in Magyan. I know I’m getting ahead of myself, but I can’t help but hope my daughter will also have a lovely wedding. I know, I know... I’m getting far, far ahead of myself here.

“Besides...I hate to put it this way, but it’d be a problem if there’s too much of a gap between her and Lain.”

It’s been pretty easy to forget lately, but Lain is the last surviving member of

the Domino imperial family that Ukyou overthrew. As such, due to political considerations, Lain herself or her child is expected to marry Ukyou's child. However, that means Lain will be marrying someone at the top of the social ladder. After all, if Lain herself ends up marrying Ukyou's son, she'll be marrying into a ruling family, even if it's of a client state. Further, because Ukyou is engaged to Setenve Arcana, it means she'll also be connected to the Arcanian royal family by marriage.

The same applies if it ends up being Lain's child that marries Ukyou's child. After all, since they'll be marrying into the ruling family of the Domino Republic, Lain's partner can't be just some random person off the street. That means she'll be marrying someone pretty high up in the Arcana Kingdom's hierarchy.

But that doesn't apply to the child born to Blois and me. In the end, she's just a child of two vassals of House Sepaeda. Blois is the daughter of a regional lord, but Hetter is going to inherit the title and he already has children of his own. I haven't been given any lands of my own, so I only have the title of Supreme Combat Instructor of House Sepaeda, and because of House Sepaeda's belief in competition, it's not a title that my daughter or son can inherit.

All this means that we already know that Lain, who isn't related to me by blood, is going to marry someone extremely prestigious, while the daughter who is related to me isn't going to be able to marry anyone particularly important. With that much of a gap between their futures, it wouldn't be surprising if it ended up causing a rift between Lain and the baby. I'd like to go ahead and remove any possible causes of discord between them as early as possible.

"That reminds me... The thought of me getting married doesn't bother you, papa?"

"Not at all. I'm very happy thinking about it."

"I don't know if I like that either..."

I mean, I understand why Lain's not exactly pleased with that response, but I also think His Fathership and His Brothership's steadfast overprotectiveness of Lady Douve is problematic in the extreme.

"The thing is...I was thinking you getting married is a sort of bookend to my

time here.”

“Well, I guess that’s true, papa, but...that makes me not want to get married.”

“Don’t worry, even if that was my original plan, that doesn’t mean I’ll never see you again once you get married.”

“Even then... I don’t like it...”

My original goal when I left the forest was to take care of Lain until she was fully grown-up and able to take care of herself. Getting married is a pretty good marker of someone being a grown-up, I think, whether looking at it from the perspective of society as a whole or as an Immortal. But, yes, it’s probably a bit heartless to just say, “Oh, you got married? Okay then, goodbye.” My intention, at least, is that I’m going to visit her at least once a month.

“Why get so gloomy over something that’s over ten years away? Besides, there’s something else you haven’t mentioned yet,” Blois says in a cool, exasperated voice.

“That’s right, papa.”

I suddenly remember I’d forgotten to ask something. It’s my own daughter’s name, of all things.

“That’s right... So, tell me her name.”

“All right... Since she resembles me, I named her Fanne Shirokuro.”

Wait, hang on, maybe I’m being insensitive here, but is Fanne really a girl’s name? I mean, Fanne Shirokuro sounds pretty good, but it doesn’t sound very feminine. Actually, when I think about it, “Blois,” “Chette,” and “Lyra” don’t sound very cute either. I mean, I named Lain because I think it’s a pretty cute name for a girl. Maybe Fanne is a pretty normal name for a girl in the Arcana Kingdom? I mean, even Lady Douve’s name doesn’t really sound...well, all that girlish. Now that I think about it, the names of the girls from Tempera Village were even worse.

“It’s a lovely name.”

I choose to respond with something that I don’t actually feel, but at least I can proudly say that it’s the right thing at this moment.

“Right? Right! It’s a name I thought of years ago!”

“I think it’s great too!”

I see. So, in the Arcana Kingdom, Fanne is a girl’s name. Lain sounds happy too, so I guess that’s all there is to it. I decide to accept it.

In an emotional moment, Fanne catches my eye. While Blois and Lain are all excited, my daughter and I are both calm. Of course, I suppose my daughter doesn’t really understand the name Fanne, but I’m sure when she grows older, she’ll consider Fanne a girl’s name.

That makes sense, since she was born in Arcana and is going to grow up here. I’m sure her friends and the people around her will have similar names. The problem here is me, in that I haven’t really adapted to the culture I’ve married into.

“At any rate, I’m also now Fanne’s father. I’ll work hard, so you can all rest easy.”

No, Fanne still sounds boyish. I feel like it’s going to take a while until I get used to calling my daughter Fanne. In fact, I’m pretty sure all the aces from Japan are going to feel the same way. It really is hard to understand foreign cultures.

Part 18 — Reporting

I'm currently sitting idle at the Wynne family estate and enjoying a rare vacation from my duties. I keep my sword practice at a reasonable level; rather than spend all my time training, I'm devoting most of my days to being a father with Fanne, Blois, and Lain. I'm currently holding the baby Fanne in my arms, and it's bringing back memories of when Lain was still a baby. Thinking about it, Lain really has grown a lot. She's gotten so much bigger in the year and a bit I was gone. Blois is also a lot different from when I first met her; she was a girl then, but now she's a proper lady and mother. It makes me reflect once more that time passes quickly.

"Wow, papa, you're good at holding Fanne."



“Well, yeah... I held you a lot when you were a baby. I let other people take care of you, but I can at least hold a baby pretty well.”

“Oh, right. That makes sense.”

From my perspective as a father, Lain not remembering that I held her as a baby is a little sad. Then again, as I said, I left most of her care in the hands of other people. Really, the only thing I did was hold her every so often, so it's understandable she doesn't remember it. At least, this is what I tell myself to ease the sadness.

“Hey, papa... When are you having your wedding with Mama Blois?”

“Let's see... Well, it'll be after Lady Douve's wedding...”

That's already been decided, and it's not in my power to change. It's a little pitiful when I think about it, but since there's nothing for me to decide, well, I can answer it without hesitation.

“Gotcha... Fanne's going to be there too, right?”

“Yes, I think so.”

It'd be strange for a daughter not to attend her parents' wedding, right? Well, I suppose it's already somewhat unusual for a child to attend their own parents' wedding. Still, since I was going to be away for over a year, having a child before we formally held a wedding was kind of unavoidable. I mean, we were going to Magyan to get permission for Lady Douve and Tahlan to get married. Since Lady Douve needed to get married first before Blois and I could get married, the way things unfolded was pretty much the only way we could have done it...

Now, from a Japanese person's perspective, it's strange to have a daughter before holding a wedding ceremony, and it's also strange to need to wait for my boss to get married first. But, well, that's talking about Japan. While it's true that I've been alive for over five hundred years, my core perspective really hasn't changed much from my time in Japan. I guess that makes sense, since I've only lived in the mortal world here for about seven years, and I was away from Arcana for the better part of a year, so I've only spent about five years actually in my new homeland.

“Hey, papa... Lady Douve and Prince Tahlan had a wonderful ceremony in the Magyan Kingdom, right?”

“Yes, it was beautiful. The plan is to hold a wedding like that here in Arcana too.”

“Same for you and Mama Blois?”

“No, probably not on that scale...”

It seems Lain also wants a fancy ceremony for Blois and me. I suppose a fancy wedding ceremony is something that girls aspire to, regardless of the world.

“Boooooo.”

Lain looks really disappointed, but this isn’t something I can do for her. Or, rather, I’m pretty sure the fancy wedding Lain is thinking about is rather different from the wedding I actually attended.

“Listen, Lain... First, Lady Douve’s wedding will have an enormous number of guests. Also, the venue is going to be really big and there’ll be a really big band...”

“Really?”

“Yes, yes... There’s no point in inviting a lot of people you don’t know, right?”

It sounds a little disrespectful, I guess, but I hope my point gets across to her.

“So, papa. What sort of people are coming to your and Mama Blois’s wedding?”

“Uh...?”

I tilt my head quizzically because I’ve never actually thought about that question. Now that I think about it, who am I actually supposed to invite to my wedding? I mean, I can’t invite Saiga and his companions, right?

“Well, if they can, I’d like to think at least either the Lord Emeritus or Lord Sepaeda could attend...”

“Why do you sound so unsure from the start?”

Lain is upset, but please consider my point of view. It’s true that I’d like His Fathership and His Brotherhood to attend my wedding. They’ve been really good

to me, and in a sense they were the ones who helped bring Blois and me together. However, the two of them have plenty of responsibilities, so I can't be sure they'll attend my wedding. That, and I have no idea about my actual social standing. Just how high up am I and what sort of people am I supposed to or allowed to invite?

"Listen, Lain... Both the Lord Emeritus and Lord Sepaeda are very important people. They're so important that I don't even know if I'm allowed to invite them to my wedding."

"That might be true, but..."

They're the most important people in House Sepaeda. Even from the perspective of the kingdom overall, they rank second only to the king. I may know them pretty well, but I don't know if I should invite them to my wedding. Maybe the best thing to do is ask them for a letter of congratulations to be read out at the ceremony? The other problem is that, if I'm going to invite them, the wedding has to be one worthy of inviting such important guests. Depending on how much that costs, I might end up going bankrupt. Well, maybe not, but at the very least, I don't want the wedding to be so expensive that the possibility even exists.

"Really... I think Blois's dad is going to be the one deciding who attends the wedding. The people I'd invite are...Master Suiboku and my students."

"You don't have *any* friends?"

"I don't have any friends that I'll be inviting to my wedding."

"Oh, papa..."

Lain looks at me with a really pitying expression. Not that things would be any better if Blois were here with me. After all, she doesn't have much in the way of a social life either.

"Don't look at me like that. Besides, there are quite a few of my students..."

"But they're not really the wedding guest sort..."

I've thought some pretty disrespectful things about them, but my daughter is even worse. It's true that my students are about as far as you can get from a

girl's dream wedding guests, but they're not *that* bad. Or, well, maybe they are. They might have done some things in the past that make them inappropriate to invite. No, wait, the past is the past. Now they're people that His Brotherhood vouches for. Doubting their suitability for the wedding would be to doubt His Brotherhood's judgment.

"But Lain... There's really no one else I can invite..."

"Isn't that pretty bad?"

I mean, I understand Lain's feelings. I guess she wants me to invite Saiga, Happine, or maybe Miss Paulette. But they're all really important people too, and I can't very well just invite them to Sepaeda for my wedding. Also, hearing her describe the situation as pretty bad doesn't feel great. It really hurts to hear that coming from my daughter.

"Lain, Blois is already a noble and I'm going to be one as well. That means there's a lot about the wedding that's more than just the ties between families. We probably don't have much choice in who we invite, but...isn't the important thing that the guests celebrate and rejoice in our wedding?"

"So, that means you don't have any people who are happy to see you get married, papa?"

Why does my heart ache so much when I'm just talking to my daughter? Her honest comments, given without even a little restraint, are all landing where it hurts.

"*Sniff...* Lain, you've certainly grown..."

I clutch Fanne tightly as I hold her in my arms. Is she also going to grow up in the blink of an eye and start hitting me where it hurts? Ah, I see. Daughters are teachers for their fathers, and just as I need to be a good father for my daughters, I also need to learn from them. It's not that I need to listen to all of their requests, but this conversation has really shed light on my sheer lack of social connections... As a father, should I make more friends outside of work? I suppose that would probably be true even if I wasn't a father.

"Hey, Sansui, there's guests here to see you."

It's then that Blois enters the room with several people in tow. Speak of the

devil and he will appear, the saying goes, and that's exactly what happens. The "guests" are the students we were just talking about inviting to the wedding.

"It's been a while, Master Sansui. We heard you'd returned from Magyan, so we thought we'd come to congratulate you on your new baby!"

They're all large and muscular men adorned in noble treasures. They're far, far from the ideal guests that girls think about when fantasizing about their dream wedding. But none of us in the room—not Blois who brought them, not Lain who sees them enter, and certainly not I—are unhappy to see them.

"Thank you so much for coming all this way."

They're all smiling at the sight of my own domestic happiness. Blois, Lain, and I all know that to celebrate is to rejoice in someone else's happiness. If they do end up coming to the wedding, then it'll be a lovely event with a lot of celebration and joy.

Lamp, Cabbo, Yuen, Inke, and Woulnut; unlike the group that accompanied us to Magyan as Lady Douve's bodyguards, they're part of the group that remained in the Arcana Kingdom to instruct the vassals of House Sepaeda on fighting techniques. There are a few other groups scattered around the territories and they're all doing a good job in their new roles. The phrasing might leave a little bit to be desired, but they also have a bit more flexibility in their schedules compared to the students who became bodyguards. I'm told they all came by to congratulate Blois when Fanne was born.

Seeing as how I was far off in distant lands and didn't even know Blois had given birth, I'm really grateful that they came by during my absence. Compared to modern Japan, giving birth in this world is a lot more difficult and dangerous. I'm sure having so many people coming to celebrate Fanne's birth was a big boost to Blois's spirits.

"Our journey to Magyan went rather well. The only unfortunate outcome was that Prince Tahlan and Princess Sunae's mother wished to keep the two in Magyan, and the two ended up leaving with a rift between them and their mother."

"Huh... Figured that would happen."

“I can understand not wanting to let such a good son marry and settle in a foreign land.”

“Well, it’s a long way away, so that’s a normal response, I think.”

No one shows any surprise when I give a brief summary of events in Magyan. In fact, they even realize that Sukreen only wanted Tahlan to stay and didn’t even care about Sunae. From what I remember hearing, Sukreen had said as much to Sunae.

“Also, your fellow students, the ones who are now Prince Tahlan’s subordinates, did their jobs well. We held some practice matches with the local elites and they welcomed us with open arms.”

“Oh...? I’m glad they didn’t embarrass Prince Tahlan or the Lord Emeritus in front of everyone.”

“And how are you all doing? I’m told you returned to your homelands before you reported to your new employers... I hope everyone welcomed you home warmly?”

It might sound like I’m being sarcastic when I say it, but becoming Lady Douve’s bodyguard or the combat instructor to a vassal house is the type of advancement that ordinary people could never hope to achieve in this kingdom. Having accomplished that feat, I’d like to think that these five were welcomed with open arms when they went back to their homelands. My intention in broaching the subject was to start a cheerful conversation, but all of their smiles look forced.

“Well, yes... I suppose the welcomes were warm, but...”

Social advancement, phrased in a negative way, means you’re an uppity overachiever. They then go into detail about how they had been welcomed home.

Chapter 4 — Whistling New Tunes

Part 19 — Advancement

No matter the person, everyone has the right to choose to close a chapter of their life. Every person spends at least part of their life climbing various mountains toward a desired summit, and they use that time either helping others climbing the same mountain by lending them a hand or otherwise trying to kick the competition off of the mountain. This, of course, depends on the exact type of mountain that person is trying to climb.

Combat instructor for a regional lord, complete with the blessing and recommendation of House Sepaeda of the Four Great Houses... To those who sought to make a name for themselves with their fighting prowess, it was a worthy summit to their climb. Of course, there were always higher levels than that. Sansui Shirokuro, who was currently on his way to Magyan, had already received a relatively high-ranking title, and so he himself was now a noble in his own right. In Saiga Mizu's case, he had been chosen to be the heir to one of the Four Great Houses. It was hard to deny that simply becoming an instructor for a regional lord was much less impressive than what those two had accomplished.

Still, being a combat instructor for a regional lord was still a good job, with perks such as good, steady pay, a fair amount of authority and respect within the specific region, and the lack of any superiors other than the lord himself. While there was the responsibility to maintain one's own skill with the blade, so long as they continued to maintain that prowess, there were no real demands for deliverables, and there was no need to put oneself in personal danger.

After all, the deliverable for a combat instructor was for the lord himself to improve in his own martial skills. Given that a regional lord had a laundry list of other responsibilities, most weren't going to aggressively pursue the additional burden of serious training. The job basically required training the lord and/or his progeny a fair amount, making them maintain their skill by exercising, then praising them for doing well.

Further, the combat instructor stood at the top of the warrior food chain of that lord's region. If they decided to open a salle, they'd have no shortage of students knocking on the door.

It was an extremely attractive job, but that also meant the competition to get those jobs was fierce. There was plenty of non-fighting competition that happened behind the scenes, such as greasing the right palms and knowing the right people. There weren't frequent openings, which was exactly why when there were such openings, there was an intense amount of behind-the-scenes conflict to secure that position.

Sansui's students were sent out with a personal letter of recommendation from Lord Sepaeda into that intense competition. The letter guaranteed, on the word of Lord Sepaeda himself, that the holder was worthy of being an instructor. Frankly, the letter had more authority than the regional lords themselves. If there were any problems, the letter guaranteed that House Sepaeda itself would take care of it, and removing an instructor with the letter without cause was essentially the equivalent of picking a fight with House Sepaeda. As such, the holder of the letter was set for life.

It would be an exaggeration to say they had gained a fortune that would let them live large for the rest of their lives, but it meant they could monopolize the extremely alluring role of combat instructor for as long as they wanted. The letter had so much gravitas that even if the regional lord the holder served was somehow stripped of their title as part of a scandal, they could simply go find another lord to employ them. The letters essentially ensured that, so long as the Arcana Kingdom didn't collapse, the letter-holders were guaranteed a certain quality of life.

"Man... It almost feels like too much."

"Don't say that. I mean, I get why you might feel that way."

"We've definitely seen way too amazing stuff..."

"It really is like a dream..."

"Well, yeah. To think, we'll be able to go home, body intact, and hang a celebratory wreath in our homeland..."

When they had first arrived in this world, Saiga, Sansui, Shouzo, and Ukyou had all harbored dreams of becoming great men and showing everyone what they could do. Those dreams had been vague and they'd had no actual idea of how they would achieve them, but there was nothing special or strange about those dreams. It was true that those four had been unique, in that they'd been given sacred treasures, or powers, or letters of recommendation from God himself, but the world was filled with young people who had dreams of making it big without even a little hope that it'd ever actually happen.

That had been true of those swordsmen, like the five here, who had challenged Sansui, lost, trained under him, seen battle after, then witnessed the battle between Fukei and Suiboku. They all harbored ambitions of their own, and while they had given up the dream of taking the place of the truly powerful people of the world after witnessing what the heights of power truly were in this world, they hadn't abandoned their dreams of achieving advancement through their own fighting skills. They continued to train and put in the effort even after they recognized they couldn't become the strongest in the country, and as a result of their hard work, they had been rewarded with the job of being a noble's combat instructor.

"Going back home after being given Rare Arts weapons, with plenty of preparation, money, and even a ride in a noble carriage... Hard to think it's true."

"How many times have you said that now?"

"Who cares? It doesn't make it any less great."

"They're not magical items, but noble treasures... But, well, I honestly can't tell the difference."

"I'm so glad we trained under Master Sansui."

The noble treasures Suiboku had made for them didn't look particularly impressive, but they were extremely capable items. They were at least equal to the equipment carried by the Royal Guard. In addition, the House Sepaeda seamstress had added a small crest of House Sepaeda and Sansui's name in kanji to each of the pieces of clothing.

Gan Jiang and Mo Ye, a sword and dagger crafted of stone.

The Sashes of Strengthen Self and Quicken Self, crafted out of bark.

The Wind-Fire Wheel, a wheel crafted by bending wood.

The Great Sage, clothing woven out of stone and grass.

When all of them were equipped at once, the wearer looked rather strange, but the wild, primitive-looking equipment was all crafted from materials that had absorbed Suiboku's ki over fifteen hundred years.

Bearing those items, five of Sansui's students were riding the carriage taking them back to their homelands. While the carriage was a bit lower in quality than the carriages that Douve or Sansui were riding to Magyan, it still bore the crest of House Sepaeda. All five of them had been born commoners, making riding the carriage even as bodyguards nearly inconceivable, never mind the even more implausible reality that they were now the passengers.

"I mean, even if they're treating us as part of the same class, that all five of us are going to be combat instructors is nice too."

"Yeah, I guess it's big that we're all from this region."

"Evidently, the guys from outside of Sepaeda are going to be Prince Tahlan's subordinates."

"I'm told they're getting paid more, though that makes sense."

"I guess they're seeing the Magyan sky about now..."

Obviously, they had already met and introduced themselves to the lords they were going to serve. For better or for worse, they were all rather ordinary as far as regional lords went, and since all five of Sansui's students were fine with receiving the same compensation and treatment as anyone else in the role, the lords had happily agreed to hire them as combat instructors after seeing Lord Sepaeda's recommendation letter. They may have appeared to be currying favor with House Sepaeda at first glance, but evidently all five lords had wanted to replace their current instructors because there had been issues with their characters. At any rate, the five of them were happy to be welcomed with open arms.

"So, what am I supposed to tell my family when I get home?"

“How many times have you asked this question?”

“Oh, who cares how many times?!”

“My family’s poor, so... Actually, the whole village is poor, so I’m sure they’ll be overjoyed at the sight of gold coins.”

“In my case, I’m pretty sure my little brother’s taken over the business, so I doubt they’ll make that much of a fuss.”

They were all men who had run away from their homelands with the declaration that they weren’t content with just settling for an ordinary life there. They had been lucky. They had fought other men who had run away from home with the same dreams, and through sheer luck, they had survived those encounters. They had been even luckier to receive instruction from Sansui. Luckiest still, they had received positions as combat instructors.

In a sense, they had been right not to pursue ordinary lives in their homelands. Even if they had been blessed with remarkable luck, they had still worked hard, struggled in the process, and achieved their dreams. Now, they were on their way home in triumph. It was understandable that they were all excited.

Conversely, vast expanses of fields and emptiness before them held nothing but boredom. The desperately poor village had a hardscrabble life that made the future look bleak. The stifling city held no dreams or hopes. Each of them had less than happy memories of their homelands, but they were still happy to have succeeded in life and to be returning home in triumph. What was important was that they had triumphed to the point that no one could doubt their success, and that everyone would envy how far they had come. They had nothing to be ashamed of and everything to be proud of.

“I bet my grandma’s going to faint when she sees the money!” said Lamp, the young man who had escaped the poverty of the slums.

“I bet my little brother’s going to be super jealous of me!” said Woulnut, the prodigal son of a great merchant family.

“I’m sure the thugs from the countryside who always looked down on me will try to start something,” said Yuen, who had come from a mid-sized city.

“Me, the guy everyone in my hometown considered a nuisance, coming home as a hero! Who could have ever imagined that? Bet my relatives are going to swarm me,” said Cabbo, who had come from an isolated backwater.

“All of my relatives are going to come asking for favors, I bet! Hah!” said Inke, who had invited his friend to run away from home.

No one could blame them as they celebrated their success in life. At the very least, Suiboku and Sansui would admit that their joy was legitimate. After all, the five of them had survived through their skill and gained their new positions on the basis of their hard work and effort.

Part 20 — Carousing

“The hell is this?”

Cabbo, one of Sansui’s students, stood staring with his mouth agape at the entrance to his hometown. He had already paid his respects to his new employer, the lord of the region, and had left his belongings at his new lodgings before taking a series of carriages to get back to the small city where he had grown up. But what a sight he had arrived at.

The city itself was festooned with handmade decorations and his name was plastered all over them with sloppy handwriting. From the entrance to the city, he could hear the commotion as people celebrated with drinks and songs. He knew that this was all to celebrate his return, but his mind refused to accept the information it was receiving.

“No way. No way, no way, no way...”

Yes, Cabbo had thought he was going to surprise everyone in his hometown. He had expected to show everyone who had treated him as a nuisance what he had accomplished. He had expected every single woman in town to throw herself at him. He had known his family would be overjoyed and had even expected to come home to a vastly expanded extended family. Still...

“This really is a backwater.”

Now that his fantasies had become reality, he was completely mortified. It was true that he had secured promotion beyond the wildest dreams of not only the inhabitants of the city, but of all the towns in the surrounding area. Becoming a regional lord’s combat instructor paled next to Sansui, who had become a noble after serving for years as the bodyguard to the daughter of House Sepaeda, or Saiga, who had become the heir to one of the Four Great Houses. Even so, it was still viewed, understandably so, as a great accomplishment in this sleepy backwater town.

“Maybe I should go back to the lord’s estate...”

It was understandable, but it was still extremely embarrassing. Surely they were overdoing the celebrations. Cabbo couldn’t help but feel that his

hometown cut a pitiful figure next to everything he had witnessed along the way. Any sentimental feelings he had held toward his hometown had been blasted away by his complete and utter mortification. It was ridiculous. The whole region was celebrating merely because he had been made the instructor to a regional lord. Cabbo saw the whole to-do as excessive and was thinking of just turning around and walking away when the people of the town found him.

“Hey! He’s back!”

“Wow, he really looks the part, doesn’t he!”

The group that had found him consisted of people that were, at best, acquaintances of his, and Cabbo wasn’t sure if he could even put names to the vaguely familiar faces. He certainly didn’t have the energy to fight them in his dazed stupor, and they gleefully ushered him toward the town square.

“Ahh, it’s the return of our town’s great hero!”

The man who was probably the current mayor embraced him. He was then followed by a group of the town’s important personages seeking handshakes and embraces of their own. They were accompanied by a group of country maidens done over with thick makeup and dresses that were several years out of fashion.

“I knew you’d make it big!”

“You’re the pride of this town!”

“I always knew you could do it!”

“I always figured you’d accomplish something big!”

The people who had looked down upon Cabbo when he had lived in the town and had been relieved to see him go, the people who had forgotten entirely about him until the recent news, now lined up to offer him unstinting praise, unconscious of their own hypocrisy. The scene was exactly what Cabbo had pictured, but it also exceeded his wildest dreams. Or perhaps the welcome, the rejoicing, the praise, were all just far more intense and heartfelt than he had dared to imagine.

“Y-Yeah, thanks...”

Cabbo put up no resistance as he tried to process the sheer shock to his system. He simply returned embraces or handshakes as people came up to him.

“Yes... Thank you so much.”

His old self would probably have been enraged at their complete change in attitude. It was true that, even now, Cabbo felt some displeasure at how everyone in the town had completely changed their attitude toward him. Still, there was also a part of him that appreciated everyone’s joy and praise, and he didn’t want to be the one to ruin the mood.

“I didn’t expect to be so warmly welcomed, so you’ve caught me by surprise. I appreciate it, though.”

Cabbo somehow forced a smile onto his face, even as his words left a faint bitter tang in his mouth. He thought about Sansui, the master he admired, and did his best to emulate him as he tried to play along with the crowd. If he were to cause a scene, or throw a fit here, that alone would besmirch his master’s name. It would also inconvenience Lord Sepaeda. Cabbo steeled himself, convincing himself of those words, and decided to play along with the people’s hero worship.

“Ahh, my son! You’ve grown into quite a man!”

“We always believed you would succeed!”

His parents, who had always treated him as a nuisance and a burden, appeared with tears in their eyes. Their about-face in how they regarded him was a little too blatant to be convincing. It was so obvious that it made him wonder if his parents had somehow altered their memories in order to remember him as a good, well-behaved son. Cabbo had, after all, stolen his parents’ money when he left the house. It would have been perfectly natural if they had disowned him afterward. This amount of rejoicing at seeing him return was clearly out of place. That wasn’t his parents’ fault, however; it was all his fault. Cabbo was aware of his own failings and swallowed all sorts of retorts, instead simply apologizing to his parents.

“Dad, mom... I-I’m sorry for causing you two so much pain. Here’s the money I borrowed, and I’ve added a bit of interest on top of it.”

“Ahh, yes, yes! You’re the best, son!”

“I’m so happy to have such a thoughtful son!”

Cabbo’s father quickly snatched the pouch full of gold he held out and hid it in his fob. Cabbo’s father hadn’t shown even a moment’s hesitation. Instead, he hid it from prying eyes as though he were a thief swiping a wallet. Based on the looks his parents were giving him, Cabbo understood that they probably would have preferred if he had given them the money when no one was looking, which was fair.

“I’ll be working at the lord’s estate, so I’ll be able to send money to you guys too.”

“Ahh, that’s wonderful!”

“Then our family’s future is secure!”

As the little family reunion took place, the people around them also cheered, as though the money was going to flow into their own pockets. Cabbo was more than happy to send money to his parents, given all the trouble he had caused them over the years. But he wasn’t so well paid that he could throw money around to everyone in the town. He found the blind optimism of the simple folk of the town unbearable. He couldn’t help but think they were operating under some misunderstanding. It’s like they were expecting something of him and he was pretty certain he wouldn’t be able to fulfill those hopes.

“So, ahem... I heard that you have a letter of recommendation from Lord Sepaeda himself!” Cabbo’s father said after a brief, awkward pause. Ordinarily, a resident of this town would go their entire life without seeing the head of House Sepaeda’s handwriting, so it was understandable that Cabbo’s father wanted to see it. For this town and its surroundings, even the regional lord was an exalted person. Compared to them, Lord Sepaeda may as well have been a god. While Cabbo was the only one who was going to gain any direct benefit from the document, perhaps the people around him thought they could get a bit of good luck simply by paying respects to the letter.

“Yes, he gave it to me. I can’t show you the contents, though.”

Cabbo held out the envelope, which was securely wrapped in expensive fabric. Everyone around him shrank back respectfully as they laid eyes upon the envelope that was, in a sense, more valuable than Cabbo's own life. It wasn't an overreaction; if anything happened to the letter, the person who damaged it could very well be executed.

"You really...have become something..."

The town's important people looked upon the envelope with trepidation while the elders clasped their hands together in reverent admiration. The youngsters kept their distance, but they still tried to move others out of their way to get a better look. The reactions of the people around him confirmed to Cabbo that he was now painfully out of place in this town.

"Yeah, true. I'm pretty impressive now."

While he was nothing compared to the aces, Cabbo had essentially achieved the impossible. Having accepted that fact, he was able to bear the looks from the townsfolk.

"Ahh..."

"Wow..."

"So cool..."

"So, this is what a real man looks like..."

That was, in a sense, just the understated confidence of the successful. Even so, the townspeople were all deeply moved by how Cabbo wasn't making a big show of his status or his success. They were thoroughly impressed by his natural confidence. As for Cabbo himself, he felt that, yes, he had succeeded, and that his success was impressive, but it didn't seem that big of a deal to him. At the very least, it wasn't something that he thought would be the target of such admiration.

I wonder how the others are doing...

The exaggerated reactions by the townsfolk reminded him of how he and his peers ordinarily regarded Sansui or Suiboku. As he considered that, he thought about how the others were doing. Were their homelands holding ridiculously

overdone celebrations as well?

“Hey, if I work hard, do you think I can work at the lord’s estate?” an innocent child walked up and asked him. Cabbo put away the precious letter, his face furrowing into a troubled frown as he told the child the brutal truth.

“Probably not, no.”

“Why?!”

“I was lucky. I met the right people, I was in the right place at the right time...”

It was true that he had put in a great deal of effort, but effort alone wasn’t enough to earn a letter of recommendation from Lord Sepaeda. It was because he had been lucky enough to run into Sansui and train under him that Cabbo had been noticed by Lord Sepaeda.

“If I hadn’t become Master Sansui’s apprentice, I wouldn’t have been able to get this far...” Cabbo said quietly, reflectively. It was the simple truth and there were no other reasons for his remarkable feat. However, that statement was also perhaps a bit thoughtless.

“Then introduce me to this Sansui person!”

“Oh, no, he’s really busy and he’s not in this country right now...”

“What! That’s not fair!”

Cabbo didn’t have a response. The innocent child had simply pointed out the truth and Cabbo struggled to find a rejoinder, while the adults started yelling at the child with a faint note of panic.

“Quiet!”

“What if you upset him?!”

“Shut him up now!”

The child was scolded as though he had inadvertently offended a noble. No doubt the adults were frightened that they were looking a gift horse in the mouth or the goose that laid the golden eggs was going to run off. They were overreacting, but it was an understandable overreaction.

I really do wonder how the others are doing...

Part 21 — Reversal

This is the story of a family of merchants located in a particular region of the Sepaeda territories. The family had been working as a merchant house for several generations, and although the oldest son had run off with the family's money, the father and the second son had worked to keep the house afloat. But despite their efforts, the house declined steadily and found itself facing ruin. It wasn't that anyone had made any major mistakes. It was just that their business was caught in a gradual spiral of decline.

The problems for a struggling merchant family often snowballed as the slow decline brought panic about its solvency. Those who had lent the family money began to call in their loans, harassing the family to repay them as quickly as possible. The other merchant houses, the ones that had recently been their trading partners, began looking for alternative suppliers. Their behavior was natural. Had another house been failing, this family would have done the same to them.

However, since it was their own house that was in peril, the father and son needed to do everything they could to avoid further losses. They put all their effort into arresting the house's decline. When loans were called in, they sold off heirlooms and furniture to make the necessary payments. They held parties despite the lack of money in order to put up a prosperous front to the other houses. They worked to show that their house was still alive and kicking as a means of gaining new business. It went without saying that this process was difficult, but the father and second son both knew what awaited them if their efforts failed.

Yet, one day, all of their problems disappeared practically overnight. The creditors stopped trying to collect on their loans and some even went so far as to offer more. Other houses began to invite both father and son to parties that they were hosting. There were even offers of business relationships from larger merchant houses, and they had sealed several major deals that were about to come into fruition.

The problems hadn't gone away because the father and the second son's

efforts had borne fruit. They had gone away because the oldest son, the one who had taken the family's money and ran away, had been appointed to be the regional lord's combat instructor. It wasn't as though the lord had said he was going to support the newly appointed instructor's merchant house, or that the instructor himself had gone around boasting about his appointment. No, the people who interacted with the merchant house simply changed their tune after learning of the elder son's appointment. In essence, the prodigal son had solved all of the problems the family had been facing, the problems that the father and younger son hadn't been able to solve despite all their efforts, without so much as lifting a finger. Furthermore, he hadn't even realized he had solved his family's problems.

"I see... I didn't know things had been that bad."

Woulnut, one of Sansui's apprentices, the prodigal son who had returned home in a strangely feral-looking outfit, furrowed his brow as he heard of his family's financial problems. He faced his father, his mother, his younger brother, and his sister-in-law and frowned as he sat in one of the great rooms of the house that looked bigger due to the lack of furniture.

"I had been planning to at least pay back the money I took...but that's definitely not enough, is it?"

Woulnut's father, mother, younger brother, his sister-in-law, and their servants all knew him well. As such, they were troubled by Woulnut being troubled at learning of his family's struggles.

"Let me be honest. I'm only the lord's combat instructor, so I'm not paid that well. And since all five of us are equals, I'm not even that important."

The family, when informed by the regional lord that their prodigal son had been appointed as combat instructor and had advanced beyond their wildest dreams, had dreaded his return, resigning themselves to dealing with Woulnut's arrogance. In fact, because their problems had actually been solved by the elder son's success, they had even been prepared to grovel and flatter him. They had been ready for any abuse he wanted to heap on them. They had been fully prepared to bear anything that he threw at them.

"For example, even if you wanted me to talk His Lordship into favoring the

family, I can't do that. I don't have that much influence."

And yet, contrary to their expectations, Woulnut listened quietly to their story and appeared completely apologetic as he explained he wasn't going to be able to help them that much. Even though Woulnut really had achieved an amazing feat by advancing, he was speaking with a proper understanding of his own position. Something was wrong. The Woulnut they knew had never been this humble.

"I don't have any influence with Lord Sepaeda either. It's true that I've spoken to him a few times, and I once served as his sister's bodyguard, but we're not particularly close or anything."

What was going on? Wasn't speaking to Lord Sepaeda something that he ought to be more proud of? At the very least, the father and younger son, who ran the merchant house, had never spoken to even the regional lord, never mind the ruler of all the Sepaeda territories.

"And my master, Master Sansui, has a big title, but he's still just a combat instructor. He doesn't have any subordinates, nor is he the sort of person who interferes in business."

Sansui Shirokuro, the Young Sword Apostle, was the kingdom's greatest swordsman and the epitome of fighting prowess, the pride of House Sepaeda. Surely being one of his apprentices ought to come with a bit more boasting?

"So, while I feel bad for admitting it... There's nothing I can really contribute to this house. I mean, I can do something like get married in order to cement political connections, but an instructor like me isn't really a big deal. I might end up playing instructor for His Lordship and the people around him three times a week or so... I mean, is there anyone who'd actually want to send their daughter to marry me...?"

There was nothing wrong with what he was saying. Woulnut had a proper understanding of his position and his importance. It would have been a much bigger problem if he had claimed something along the lines of "I can talk to Lord Sepaeda for you," or "I'll arrange matters with His Lordship," or "My master can take care of anything, no matter how hard." Indeed, their Woulnut had been exactly the sort of man who would say such things. He wasn't a man who was

this self-aware.

“What happened to you?”

“Hey, why’s that the first thing you ask me?!”

His father’s confusion was perfectly understandable. Even so, Woulnut himself hadn’t grasped that his father was confused. Instead, he thought that his father was disappointed in him. He believed it was only natural that his father, having received the happy news that his elder son had been given a prestigious position, would think of making use of that new position to solve the family’s problems. He even considered that his father might be desperate and would even bow his head to the son he resented. What he hadn’t imagined, not in the slightest, was that the simple fact that he had been appointed an instructor to the local lord had solved his family’s problems. Not even in his wildest dreams would he have thought that he was being given an after-action report about problems that had already been resolved.

“It seems impossible that you truly understand your own position or its importance.”

“Okay, even I’m hurt by that... Lord Sepaeda would have never written a letter of recommendation for a man who didn’t know his place, even if that man was an apprentice of Master Sansui and armed with items crafted by Master Suiboku.”

None of the servants could believe what they were seeing. It was true that what Woulnut was saying was logical, but they couldn’t help but wonder if this really was the same man who had been so arrogant and abusive when they had last seen him.

“Even if you’ve never met Lord Sepaeda in person, you’ve at least heard about his personality, right? He really is as stern as they say. He wouldn’t give a recommendation letter to a thoughtless fool.”

“Sure, I’ve heard that, but...”

“Yeah, when I left this house, I wasn’t someone who could have gotten one of these letters. But Master Sansui gave me a lot of training. He didn’t just help me grow as a swordsman, he made me into a proper man. Master Sansui really is

the greatest...”

It was at this point that the elder son’s expression finally took on a look of pride.

“At first, I was skeptical about this whole Young Sword Apostle thing, but he really is ridiculously strong. He’s just a much better man than I am. He’s not just strong, but he’s also kind, or I suppose he has a lot of easy confidence... He’s just a man who has an awful lot to admire about him.”

The entire family was now firmly confused as they observed Woulnut’s demeanor. The man who had been the epitome of self-expression and ego when they knew him was now going out of his way to praise someone else.

“Saiga, the ace of House Batterabbe, is also really powerful. He’s the wielder of Eckesachs the Legendary Sword, but even without it, he’s super strong. Of course, there’s a lot I can’t say about him.”

Evidently, Woulnut was privy to a secret about the heir to House Batterabbe as well.

“Caputo’s ace, Shouzo... He’s also ridiculous. You know how the rumors say he can blow away the clouds? Turns out it’s all true. I can understand now why they call him the world’s greatest mage. It’s pretty much impossible to imagine anyone with more destructive power. I also caught a glimpse of the new emperor of Domino, the royal house’s ace. He’s really, really scary.”

Having seen just how big the wider world was with his own eyes, Woulnut regaled his family with just how insignificant he truly was compared to what he had seen.

“Well, the one who’s most overwhelmingly ridiculous is Master Suiboku. Look, the clothes I’m wearing were made by him. Oh...but they’re not for sale, sorry...”

No one in the manor had any way of knowing just how strong Woulnut was now or how well he actually knew people in the upper echelons of society. But just hearing how happy he was recounting his encounters with those more powerful, those substantially greater, than him was enough to get across that this was someone who had matured substantially in his years away from home.

Everyone who had known the younger Woulnut couldn't hide their surprise at the sheer maturity he now showed.

"Oh, I'm sorry about going on about myself. You don't want to hear me bragging when the house is facing bankruptcy, right? Anyway...there isn't much I can do, but I'll do what I can."

The surprise wasn't a bad thing. The elder son had run away from home, only to have made a name for himself, learned his place in society, and developed connections with lofty personages. It was surprising, but not in a bad way. In fact, it was a good thing for this house and family.

"What the hell!" Woulnut's younger brother shouted angrily, cutting him off. Yes, Woulnut's advancement and achievements were surprising and worked in the family's favor, but it was also only human nature to be unable to simply just be happy and accept what had happened.

"Huh?"

It was Woulnut's turn to be surprised by his brother's sudden outburst. The brother Woulnut had known wasn't a man who would suddenly yell out in anger.

"Do you know how much we struggled because you took the house's money when you left?!"

"Yeah, I mean, I feel guilty about it. That's why I'm going to repay all of it with interest..."

"That's not the point! It doesn't matter now! Do you know how much the people around us laughed at us because of your bad reputation?!"

His brother's tirade brought Suiboku and Fukei's argument to mind. No, that hadn't even managed to reach the level of an argument. He paused for a moment before replying.

"I see. I'm sorry I caused you that much trouble," Woulnut said, electing to simply apologize. He knew it wasn't enough to earn him forgiveness, but he couldn't think of anything else to do. His brother, in the end, showed no sign of forgiving him.

“I worked so hard to fix all the problems you caused! Why the hell does everything have to end up being solved like this?!”

“Huh?”

“The moment news came down that you were the lord’s instructor, everyone started treating us like royalty. All the people who wouldn’t even give us the time of day, no matter how much money we spent or how much we groveled, all turned around and started doing business with us just because you’d spent all your time playing around and swinging a sword! That’s ridiculous! It’s unfair! It makes me look like an utter moron for taking my work seriously!”

The elder son looked over at his father, and the older man’s silent support for the younger son’s rant finally made all of the pieces fall into place in Woulnut’s mind.

“Me and dad worked ourselves to the bone to protect the house! We worked hard, we put in the effort, and we did our best to build up trust slowly but steadily!”

“I’m sure everyone noticed.” Woulnut understood why his brother was angry and tried to calm him by complimenting his efforts. He knew it would probably make his brother even angrier, but he couldn’t do anything else. “No matter how successful I might have been, if no one trusted you or dad, no one would have spared you a second glance. My success just gave you the little push you needed.”

Everyone was once again caught by surprise by Woulnut’s words. The younger son’s anger, his criticism of Woulnut, was extremely unfair. At the very least, the older son had contributed plenty to the house, certainly more than enough to make up for everything he had taken from them in the past. And yet, the younger son was enraged that his brother had ultimately contributed to the family’s fortunes. It would have been perfectly understandable for the older son to be upset by his brother’s attitude and let it devolve into a shouting match. Yet, in spite of all that, Woulnut was actually admitting that his brother had a point.

“Think of it this way. Consider me something to be used, as much as you can, to make up for all the problems I’ve caused you to this point.”

His words were met by silence.

“I understand why you’re angry at me, but just yelling at me is putting mom, dad, and your bride in an uncomfortable position.”

Even more silence greeted that.

“This is the sort of thing we should hash out alone over drinks...” Woulnut said with a forced smile, accepting and deflecting the venom directed at him. While his phrasing wasn’t perfect, it was still a mature response worthy of an adult. However, Woulnut was already aware that this sort of response would simply pour more fuel on the raging fire of anger that burned in his brother’s breast.

“This is ridiculous!”

The younger son stood up and slammed the door behind him as he stalked off. His wife hurriedly followed after him. The parents were caught between following the younger son and not simply leaving their older son sitting there by himself.

“Well, guess this is about how it goes.”

Woulnut couldn’t help but wish things had gone a little more smoothly. He sighed, recognizing that even when the problems had all been solved and all the wrongs of the past had been atoned for, the resentments festering in people’s hearts wouldn’t be so easily forgotten.

Part 22 — About Face

Yuen, one of Sansui's apprentices, hailed from a relatively large city within Sepaeda. Unlike the backwater parts of Sepaeda, there was no great furor over one of the city's sons being appointed as the regional lord's new combat instructor. At most, it was one of many rumors circulating through the city. Now, things might have been different had he become a noble or something along those lines, but given that he remained a commoner, there wasn't any public celebration to commemorate his appointment.

Yuen, disappointed by the lack of an official celebration, had decided to hold a party of his own. He gathered his friends at his favorite bar and decided to hold a party to commemorate his elevation.

"Here's everything to cover all your tabs to this point and what we'll be having today. No need for change. Yo, everyone! All drinks are on me tonight! Help me celebrate my promotion!"

Yuen was pleased that he had been able to gather all his friends in his favorite bar and say the words he'd long dreamed of. A revel in an ordinary bar in an ordinary part of the city wasn't all that expensive, even when he was paying for everyone's drinks. However, it was enough to feel that he had finally made it in the world. Just watching the others enjoy free drinks was enough to put Yuen in a great mood.

"Hey, hey, Yuen, you're not going to drink? That's not like you. You can order whatever you want!"

The owner of the bar, who had seen the tabs he had long since given up on as a lost cause be repaid twice over, came over as he noticed Yuen himself wasn't drinking. Up until today, the owner would have regarded Yuen skeptically and considered him a flight risk, but he had already received enough money upfront to cover all of the alcohol in the bar, so he was in an extremely good mood.

"Well, yeah."

However, Yuen refused the offer of a drink. While he wanted people to

celebrate his success, he knew not everyone was going to feel the same way. Even as he hosted the festivities, there was a part of him that was still on guard. At the very least, he had no intention of having a drop in this bar.

“Oh, looks like there’s a private event tonight.”

“They’re saying there’s no drinks for us, eh?!”

Yuen’s caution wasn’t misplaced, and several bellicose men soon walked into the bar. They were a group of men that made up a quasi-gang and had been his enemies when he had lived in the city. It was clear that they weren’t interested in participating in the festivities.

“Ahh, it’s you guys.”

As those enjoying the free alcohol froze, Yuen, the host, was alone in welcoming them into the bar. At first glance, he looked like a fool who had let his extraordinary success go to his head.

“I don’t know if you guys heard, but I made it big recently, so I’m throwing a party to celebrate. We had our differences in the past, but now that they’re in the past, they’re just good memories for me. If you’d like, you’re welcome to join in the party.”

However, the fact that he hadn’t had a drop to drink belied what Yuen actually felt about the newcomers.

“Yeah, we heard. Looks like you did well for yourself.”

“You got into Lord Sepaeda’s good graces and now you’re the lord’s combat instructor, right?”

“So jealous...”

They were all armed and it was obvious what they were thinking of doing. The bar owner was on guard, as he didn’t want them trashing his establishment, but given that the newcomers had come in ready to fight, he wasn’t able to make any concrete moves to stop them.

“It must be an easy job, since even you can do it.”

“It’s nice to be loved by important people, eh?”

“Heavy responsibility, don’t you think? Sure you don’t wanna let me do it instead?”

Yuen wasn’t sure how seriously to take their provocations. However, based on the sheer hostility they were directing at him, it was clear that they resented his success enough to want to hurt him. It didn’t take an Immortal to feel out their intentions; even a small child would have been able to see it.

“Jealous, hm?” Yuen stood up from his seat at the bar, smiling confidently as he taunted the thugs. “I see, I see. I’m happy to see that you lot are so jealous.”

His demeanor wasn’t simply the confidence of the successful. No, there was an air of strength about him as well.

“Don’t worry about it. The party is open for everyone. You can drink, you can sing, you can dance... Do as you want.”

Of course, there was a good reason for Yuen’s confidence. Part of it was the fact he hadn’t had anything to drink, but he was also wearing all of his noble treasures. That meant that everyone looked at him as though he were a bit of an eccentric, but also that he would be perfectly fine even if he was attacked. If anything, the thugs who had come into the bar expecting to attack a defenseless opponent were the ones who were unprepared for what was about to happen.

“Gotcha, gotcha... You want to retire due to injuries even before you start, eh?”

“In that case, we’ll lend you a hand.”

“Get him!”

In contrast to the men, who had already drawn their swords when they entered the bar, Yuen had kept his weapons in their sheaths. Just seeing that difference, all of the bystanders imagined a tragic fate for Yuen.

“Obviously hostile, worked up, and attacking as a group from the front in a crowded bar.”

In spite of the odds, Yuen remained calm, as he had already accounted for this outcome. Even if his weapons were still sheathed, he was already prepared to

fight. His words expressed an easy confidence, but his eyes were completely focused. He reached down, not for his long blade but for his dagger, and prepared the Sash of Quicken Self as he slowly walked over to his opponents. Yuen was carefully judging the distance, looking for an opening to take the initiative.

“To take down reckless fools like that so easily and thus show my strength to the world... I suppose that’s what it means to have to maintain one’s reputation.”

The thugs attacked with overhead slashes, each move so obvious that it felt choreographed, and Yuen almost felt insulted. He activated his Sash of Quicken Self and rapidly stepped forward as he drew his dagger. He swung through with his blade, without putting his weight behind the strike, and instead moved past them. It wasn’t just against one of them; he had stepped and slashed between all of them as he wove his way through their ranks.

“House Sepaeda is a martial house and I’m one of the warriors recognized by the lord of the house.”

The dagger, being shorter than the sword, was easier to handle, and Yuen checked its weight in his hand before he flicked the blade. Blood splattered on the floor as it wicked off the stone surface of the dagger.

“Ordinarily, I would take your heads, but today’s a festive occasion.”

Whoo, that sounds just like something Master Sansui would say, Yuen thought to himself. He wasn’t drunk on alcohol, but rather on his own skill, and finished the statement he had wanted to use at least once in his life.

“I’ll just treat it as a drunken joke and let you go with a single index finger.”

Blood stained the bar’s floorboards red, dripping from the hands of the attackers. Each of the attackers had lost a single finger each. What was perhaps more frightening was the fact that they hadn’t suffered any wounds other than the amputated fingers.

“Ah...!”

“Agh...!”

“Owww...!”

When doing hard physical labor, it wasn't unusual to lose a finger or two. There was nothing strange about it happening in mid-combat either. However, it was another matter entirely if the swordsman meant to slice off a single finger and was able to do so without causing any other damage.

“If you intend to keep fighting, your heads are next. But none of us want that, do we?”

The men who had lost a finger each bit back the pain. That was the very most that they could manage. They were clutching their mangled hands out of sheer stubbornness, but their eyes couldn't hide the fear they felt. Yuen's technique, which was hard to describe as Yuen had merely grown stronger, had thrown the thugs into a state bordering on panic.

Yuen was pleased to see the fear on their faces. He was reveling in the fact that he had been able to act like Sansui and to have his opponents fear him like people feared the Young Sword Apostle. It gave him a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. He lightly chided himself for winning in a faintly obnoxious manner, then gestured breezily to the bleeding men.

“If you go to a mystic now, you should be able to keep your fingers, no?”

The three men, either believing they were really at risk of losing their heads or having simply accepted their opponent was too strong, quickly picked up their fingers and left the bar. They had originally come to the bar to harass Yuen for his success. That wasn't worth losing a finger, never mind risking their heads.

“Hmph... They haven't changed.”

Had his fellow students been here, Yuen knew they would have chastised him for this little dance. Still, he couldn't help but feel a certain pleasure at the fearful respect that he saw in the gazes of the people around him as he sat back down at the bar. Exclamations of surprise and admiration sprang up around the room. What had simply been an excuse for free drinks had turned into a proper party of appreciation for Yuen himself.

“Wow...”

“That’s badass...”

“He totally just chopped off their fingers!”

“Unbelievable...”

Yuen knew that his master would probably say that finding fulfillment in hurting someone meant that he still needed training, but he hoped that maybe it was acceptable just for one night. He had always admired Sansui’s ability to so casually defuse a situation, but doing it himself was more satisfying than he had imagined. It really was enjoyable to gather admiring looks without having to overtly put effort into showing off one’s strength.

Everyone in the bar looked at Yuen with admiration and envy. The little display had shown them that the man who was buying them drinks really had been appointed to be the lord’s combat instructor. They understood that a man who had been one of them until just a few years ago had really achieved success and obtained promotion.

“Hey... Can I see that sword?”

One of the revelers showed an interest in Yuen’s weapons. Yuen showed him the sword and the dagger without any particular hesitation.

“Yeah, sure.”

Neither Gan Jiang nor Mo Ye were particularly good-looking weapons. That was why many of the people in the bar had thought Yuen was using some truly pitiful weapons, despite his new title. But having seen him actually wield one in combat, the simplicity of the weapons went from plainness to a certain mysterious charm. Everyone found themselves drawn to the blades, and they wanted to see for themselves what they were like.

Many of Yuen’s old friends began to come around to touch the stone sword and dagger. Their expressions were extremely serious, as though they were touching jewels or some other kind of valuable object. Showing off the two weapons that had been crafted for him was quite fulfilling. Yuen watched them with an expression of enjoyment.

“Wow... So, you can do that with these, huh?”

Still, Yuen wasn't without his concerns. There had been an occasion when Sansui had remembered how he had been years ago when lecturing Saiga. Similarly, Yuen imagined unfortunate conclusions that his old friends might be drawing. They weren't much different from how he had been before he had been given an opportunity to grow, and he was wary of them doing something stupid with his weapons.

"Hey, how did you end up with these weapons anyway?" one of his friends, sword in hand, asked with a drunken expression.

"I became the apprentice of Sansui Shirokuro, the Young Sword Apostle and the ace of House Sepaeda. Then I put in endless hours of effort and training until he gave me his blessing as a swordsman. The sword and the dagger were crafted by Master Sansui's master, Master Suiboku, as a graduation gift for me. Not just me either. All of Master Sansui's students who have achieved a certain level of skill have a set."

Yuen pretended to recount the story boastfully, as he already understood what his friend was about to say. He spoke with a breezy confidence, but he still felt a certain sadness at that realization.

"Do you think I can become his apprentice too?"

"Not anymore. Master Sansui is now a noble, so he won't instruct anyone who isn't in the army or already one of his students. Besides, he's currently off in a distant kingdom."

A strange awkwardness, a tense silence enveloped the room.

"Gotcha..."

"Yup."

"That's not fair."

Oh, yes, his friends misunderstood.

"You were able to get an amazing weapon like this..."

"Yeah, isn't it great? It's made just for me. Entirely for me."

"Hey, you've had a lot of good things happen until now, right?"

“Yeah, that’s true. I was able to meet a lot of people who may as well live in a completely different world.”

There were those among them who were operating under that misunderstanding as well.

“That’s not fair. You weren’t any different from us until a little while ago.”

“Yeah, I guess life takes strange turns.”

“Then, c’mon, gimme these swords.”

“Ha ha ha! I can’t do that, of course.”

The gazes of the people around him started to change a bit. They had gone from congratulations to jealousy. They were no different from the thugs from earlier; both groups were completely consumed by envy.

“C’mon, you’ve had your fun.”

But that, too, was understandable. Both Yuen’s friends and his enemies in this city were all about the same level in terms of personality and character. The only difference was whether or not they were close to Yuen. Otherwise, they were all pitiful characters who had little in the way of future potential. Today was fun and tomorrow would likely be fun too. However, there was no clarity, no future for them beyond that. Almost all of Yuen’s friends were like that. And now, Yuen alone had a bright future ahead of him. They couldn’t help but resent him.

“Hey, hey, don’t be ridiculous. I still have more to accomplish. I mean, I might be able to when I’m an old geezer.”

“Don’t say that. I wanna have some good times too.”

The friend operating under the wrong idea showed exactly what he was imagining for his own future. He intended to replace Yuen, to take the future that had been promised to him and live in glory. It was a delusional fantasy, but Yuen understood why his friend wanted to believe in the possibility. He couldn’t help but understand.

“C’mon, we’re friends, aren’t we?”

“We’re friends. That’s exactly why I’m buying your drinks.”

The alcohol was probably speaking too, but the friend had turned Yuen's blade in his direction.

"C'mon, lemme have it."

"Hey, so what are you planning to do when you have that sword? Do you think you'll be employed by His Lordship just because you have it?"

"Yeah, why not? I mean, you're not much different than me and you get to be employed by His Lordship because you have these awesome weapons."

"No, no, I also have a letter of recommendation from Lord Sepaeda. See? Signed by Lord Sepaeda himself." Yuen continued the conversation without correcting his friend's misconceptions.

"Then give me that too."

"No way, this already has my name on it. Besides, I've already introduced myself to His Lordship."

"Then switch with me! I can manage if I have these, right?!"

"Don't be ridiculous. You can't serve as a combat instructor. You've never used a sword or a dagger, have you?"

"You're not much better, are you?!"

Yuen's friends were operating under a grave misunderstanding. They believed that the fight earlier was all thanks to Yuen's weapons. Their confusion was understandable and they were at least half right. But Yuen was actually substantially different from the friend that sat in front of him. Yuen had trained and practiced with the sword even when he had lived in this city. Without that foundation, he wouldn't have gotten as strong as he did with just a few years of training. His friend from this city didn't even know about the effort Yuen had put in when he had still lived here. It was perhaps only natural, but there was still something about it that saddened him.

"That's not right! How did you do it but not me?!"

"You've had too much to drink. That blade's just really sharp. Having it doesn't make you a better swordsman or anything."

In his friend's mind, there was no way that Yuen was that impressive, so he

couldn't be all that different from him. Hence, there was nothing Yuen could do that he couldn't do too. Yuen knew that, in the past, he would have felt the same way. He would have looked at nothing more than the person's surface and completely misunderstood the situation without looking even a little bit further. It wasn't like his friend was particularly unusual or ignorant.

"Here, give it back. That's a special weapon that Master Suiboku gave to me. It's worth more to me than all the money in the world. Don't take a friend's treasure, man."

"You aren't... You aren't...!"

You, the one hogging all the glory, aren't...

"You aren't my friend, dammit!"

No, the one hogging all the glory is my enemy.

"Hey, now, no need to say that. Don't be such a jerk about it."

When the friend drew back with the sword, his line of sight was blocked by the blade and his own arms. Yuen used that brief moment to close the distance, grab a fork from the table, and press the prongs against his friend's neck. He hadn't used a single one of his noble treasures.

"Even if you're drunk, it's not a funny joke, buddy."

"W-Wait, please."

"We're friends, right?"

"Y-Yeah... We're friends."

Yuen was the one who had changed. His friends hadn't changed at all. His friends were bad people, and back in the day, Yuen himself had been a bad man. While he had put in the effort to train with the sword, he had been a pitiful man who had nothing else to be proud of. Should Yuen be happy or sad that he had left that pathetic man behind?

"Then give that back to me. It's about as important to me as my life. Life is important, right?"

Everyone present tensed, as though each of them had a blade pressed against

their throat. It was only at that moment that they all realized that the Yuen before them wasn't the same man they had once known.

"Yeah, here, have it back!"

"Don't be so scared. It's just a drunken joke that got out of hand, right?"

If there was one saving grace, it was that Yuen was now strong enough to settle the problem without having to hurt his "old friends."

"I mean, it wasn't funny, but still."

Part 23 — A Turn for the Worse

Inke, who had bet everything on a one-in-a-million chance of success when he left his hometown, had been lucky enough to find success. But not everyone who had left that town had been as lucky. He and a friend had left their hometown together, and Inke had been fortunate in surviving long enough to meet Sansui, but the friend had died before he reached that point. Inke hadn't done anything to cause his death; his friend had simply pushed his luck a step too far.

"So, you've become a nobleman's combat instructor, huh?" A woman lay in a bed in a cramped, dirty room. She was the mother of Inke's dead comrade. "And what happened to my son?"

"He died a while ago," Inke answered quietly as the woman glared at him. She had already been prepared for that news. No, perhaps it was more accurate to say she had already given up on her son. He simply accepted her harsh gaze as he set down a bag full of gold coins and a piece of fruit.

"Money and fruit to pay your respects, huh?"

"I don't know how seriously he meant it, but he always said he was going to earn enough money to cure your illness. Consider that purse to be that money. Also, the fruit is a cure for all diseases. It's fine if you don't believe me, though."

His friend's mother had an illness that required a lot of money to cure. However, having achieved an appropriate position in life, it was a sum that was easy enough to earn. Inke, who had been appointed to a position of that level, had brought enough money to treat her disease, and a piece of fruit that no amount of money could buy.

"You want me to consider us even for talking my son into going with you?"

"No, not at all. It's just to get closure."

The gifts were extraordinary, but they were no consolation for the woman. Inke had known that it wasn't enough to make up for the death of her son before he had come here.

“I might use that money to hire an assassin.”

“I can handle anyone willing to work for that amount of money. If you want to waste it, go ahead and do that.”

His friend’s mother burned with resentment. It seemed she was cursing the fact that he had survived more than his actual success. Inke simply took the abuse before he left the room.

“Well... It’d be worse if she was happy with this outcome.”

Inke had returned all the way to his hometown to hand over the money and a cure, only to be abused by the very person he had come to visit, and yet he felt a sense of relief. Perhaps his dead friend was also cursing him, but even so, Inke had no intention of dying just because people resented him. He felt a certain amount of responsibility to the memory of his friend, but not so much as to simply lie down and die for the sake of his friend’s memory.

Inke and his friend had simply wanted to become strong and important. There hadn’t been much difference between the two of them and Inke didn’t feel in the slightest that it should have been him who died rather than his friend. Even so, that didn’t mean the friendship wasn’t real. Inke valued his friend’s memory enough to at least report his death to his mother and fulfill the goal that he hadn’t been able to accomplish.

“Well, then... Guess I’ve run out of things to do.”

Inke left the small, dirty house and wandered around his hometown. Given that he was dressed in the feral fashion of his noble treasures, he stood out like a sore thumb in the city.

“What’s with that guy? He’s dressed weird... Eh? Isn’t that Inke?”

“Are those clothes and weapons equipment imbued with a Rare Art?”

“Guess it’s true... The whole story about him finding favor with Lord Sepaeda and getting a big promotion.”

The men watched him resentfully, wondering why Inke had all the luck, cursing the fact that they hadn’t left the city themselves. The women looked at him with envy; why did it have to be Inke? If they had known, they would have

cozied up to him more in the past.

Inke had to admit the stares actually gave him a sense of smug satisfaction. He hadn't actually hurt anyone in the process, so no doubt his master would forgive him for that bit of vanity. Besides, he had been ordered by Lord Sepaeda to dress this way. Just as Sansui always wore a kimono and sandals, Sansui's students were ordered to always wear their noble treasures and not to hide them from the world.

"Now that I think about it..."

It was a pretty big deal to be given orders from Lord Sepaeda himself. He held the second most important title in the kingdom, and here in the Sepaeda territories, he was effectively a king. Essentially, Inke had been given direct orders from the ruler of these lands. That was quite a feat indeed. Although, like all orders issued by Lord Sepaeda, those specific orders had a rather frightening addendum that came with them.

"Hey, it's been a while, man!"

"Ahh, hey."

As Inke wandered the city, briefly letting himself believe the world revolved around him, an old friend called to him from behind. His friend looked happy to see him and even smiled widely at being recognized. Smiles had a special power to them, and even if it wasn't from someone Inke had particularly missed, it still gave him a sense of warmth to be greeted with one.

"I heard you made it really big!"

"Yeah, it's just as it looks."

"I see, I see. So, the rumors were true."

The old friend seemed genuinely happy as he wrapped his arm around Inke's shoulder. Inke casually accepted the friend's invasion of his personal space and wrapped his arm around his friend's shoulder in turn.

"All right then, I'll buy us some drinks! Tell me stories about the capital!"

"Hold on now... You sure about that? I'm not drinking any rotgut. My palate's all refined now."

“There’s a bar that serves really good stuff! I swear you’ll like it.”

The stares from the bystanders grew even more pointedly hostile. It was only natural. Inke hadn’t simply gotten rich or come home for a visit; he had come equipped with a proper official title. The eyes that looked upon the successful man and his friend burned with resentment. There were quite a few who harbored the dark hope that the two happy individuals would be struck by misfortune.

“It’s a great hole-in-the-wall. It’s a special place where all the connoisseurs go to get the best drinks.”

Inke’s friend led him through an underground entrance into a small bar with a handful of seats. There was a small table located in front of a luxurious-looking sofa, with countless bottles lining the bar’s walls. It didn’t look like it was purely for the enjoyment of alcohol, but rather more like a shady place for less wholesome activities.

“I see, I see. I’m surprised you know a place like this.”

“You might have made it big, but I’m earning a good living in this city myself. My boss told me about this place,” Inke’s old friend said boastfully before offering him a glass. “Here, have a dram.”

Inke quietly closed his eyes at the distinct scent of alcohol.

“Sorry, but I can’t drink this.”

“Hey, why not, man? I mean, even if your tastes are all posh, you can’t tell what it tastes like if you don’t have a drop, eh?”

“Then why don’t you drink it first?”

While Inke couldn’t see anything with his eyes closed, he could sense that his old friend’s expression had tensed up.

“Oh, before you start... Don’t try to make me the bad guy here. If you don’t like my skepticism, then you don’t need to drink that. Just tell me what you’re doing for a living.”

Inke was completely exasperated at his friend. He had been badly

disappointed when he had been led into a bar in the basement, but this behavior had turned that disappointment into something more sour. The bar was clearly a shady establishment. It was easy enough to sense that there was some trap behind it. Even if they wanted to lure him in, surely they could've at least tried a little harder. He couldn't even pretend to play along with such a sloppy setup.

“Even if there's nothing in the drink, I can't very well drink something paid for by someone whose job is a mystery.”

His old friend blinked in surprise. It was as though this turn of events was impossible, as though he couldn't believe Inke's reaction. Inke's disappointment grew when he saw his friend's expression.

“I figured you meant to exploit me somehow and make use of the fact I work for the lord of this region, but this? I mean, you may as well have a sign saying you brought me here with criminal intentions.”

“Wh-What the hell is that supposed to mean...? Don't assume I'm doing anything shady for work.”

“Then you don't have to tell me your job, just show me your wallet. C'mon, now, lemme see the contents.”

Asking a friend who was offering to pay for drinks to show you their wallet wasn't particularly strange. After all, it would suck to be stuck with the bill after drinking and eating under the assumption that the friend was paying.

“You haven't been promoted, have you? You don't have the wits or the tongue for this. They just picked you because you were my friend, yeah?”

“I-Inke! Don't let the fact that you're important now go to your head!”

Inke had set the sword and dagger from his belt next to the sofa. He was ready to draw them at a moment's notice. Even without an Immortal's ability to sense auras, Inke was prepared for what he could sense was about to happen.

“That's enough. Stay out of the way, will you?”

Several armed men, clearly belonging to the underworld, stepped into the room. Seeing them enter, Inke's old friend bowed his head and fled the room.

“So...it seems you noticed quite a bit earlier. Does that mean you’re willing to talk?”

“I’m willing to listen, at least.”

“Good, that makes things simple.”

The man, apparently the leader of the group, came and sat in the seat that Inke’s old friend had just vacated. The man looked Inke over with a malicious, appraising grin.

“So, how’s business, Mister Combat Instructor, sir?”

“Well... I’d say I’m happy, even though it sounds cheap.”

“Yeah, cheap... Very cheap.”

Inke gazed expressionlessly at the drink in front of him, the one his old friend had poured him, not even bothering to look over at the man.

“So, it sounds like you’re aware that combat instructors don’t get paid a whole lot.”

The underworld man was basically correct. Someone like Sansui, who was employed directly by the royal family or one of the Four Great Houses to conduct training for soldiers and officers, was paid handsomely. Unfortunately, just being an instructor to a regional lord wasn’t particularly lucrative.

“Well, of course that’s the case. Combat instructor is mostly an honorary position. The whole job is meant for some geezer who’s too old for the army to get paid to flatter a useless noble.”

While the phrasing was quite crude, the man had the right understanding of what the job entailed and the amount that it paid. Combat instructors were paid relatively well, but it wasn’t enough to live in luxury.

“But the title is worth a lot. That alone brings in a lot of money, eh?”

“Planning to open a salle or something?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Gathering poor students is just a pittance. It’s all about making deals with merchant houses that want to do business with the lord. You know, tell them that for the right price, you’ll get them invitations to the lord’s

parties.”

The man was proposing a scam. Yes, the ones who ran those scams were terrible, but those who fell for them weren't exactly innocent either. These were common enough, though, and there were quite a few people who fell for them.

“Oh? You're not sure things'll go that smoothly? Don't worry about it. Your predecessor did the same thing and it went well for him.”

That was why the lord had wanted a replacement for Inke's predecessor. The underworld figures believed that, because the previous holder of the office had succeeded, the new one would succeed now, and this belief showed their own character. Ordinarily, when someone got caught committing a crime, it was human nature to want to get out of that business before you yourself got caught. But there were plenty of people who thought they were the exception, that they would never get caught. Or perhaps they believed that they wouldn't lose anything if Inke was fired.

“The whole title is cool, you know, combat instructor and all. So, they bring all the proposals themselves without you having to lift a finger. All you have to do is sort through them. It's just changing the order that they get to go to the balls, eh?”

“Before you go any further, Lord Sepaeda already told me what my predecessor did.”

“Oh, don't worry about it. If you stay quiet, no one's gonna find out.”

The underworld figures thought that Inke was on board with their scheme by his presence. That was why they mistakenly assumed that whatever he said, it was all an effort to negotiate terms.

“Further, my master...my sword instructor...is extremely good at detecting lies. If I do anything like that, he'll come to take responsibility and kill me. So, I'm afraid the answer is no.”

“Oh? You talking about that Young Sword Apostle or whatever?”

Inke closed his eyes as he began to hear the words he had expected to hear.

“Don’t need to put up that sort of front. It’s all lies, right? He’s called Sepaeda’s ace, but it’s at least half lies. There’s no one who can do all that.”

It was understandable. Sansui’s accomplishments were unbelievable even for those who saw them firsthand. For those who only knew of them through rumors, it was understandable that they wouldn’t believe them at all.

“I don’t believe there’s even anyone real behind the whole thing. So, what’s the truth there?”

Inke knew very well that Sansui had to be seen to be believed. Even so...

“You know, right? The truth about the scam artist called Sansui Shirokuro.”

Inke wasn’t such a good man that he could sit still as someone insulted his master...

“Care to see for yourself if it’s a scam?” Inke’s anger was clear in his tone as he reached for the sword at his side. The negotiations, such as they were, were now officially over.

“Oh, looks like we made him mad.”

However, these were men of the underworld. They weren’t going to be intimidated by Inke reaching for his weapon. They were there to talk to a man who had been chosen to be the regional combat instructor. They had made appropriate preparations. Several armed men surrounded the sofa as Inke sat with his weapon sheathed and at his side. The thugs were certain they had cornered Inke and held the advantage.

“Don’t be so hasty. This is a good deal for both of us. We don’t want to kill the combat instructor. That would cause a fuss. So...”

“A fair amount of money is moving over this, right? So, you’re pretty high up in the organization?”

“Hm? Yes, of course. Meaning...”

“Then you’re worth more than enough as a hostage.”

Inke always wore his Sash of Quicken Self. That meant that he could prepare to fight without even picking up his blade. If the most his opponents could do was wield magic, if they had no way to enhance their physical abilities, then

needing to pick up and draw his sword presented no complications for Inke in a small, enclosed space.

“Huh?”

The armed thugs had been certain of victory the moment they had surrounded Inke and created the conditions for checkmate. They had let their guard down in that confidence. Before they could regain their focus, Inke rapidly drew his blade and attacked.

“You, the survivor.”

With his attack complete, three of the standing men collapsed. Their heads slid off their necks and dropped to the floor at exactly the same moment their bodies crumpled in place.

“If you don’t want the sitting one to die, go gather your organization’s soldiers.”

The moment Inke demanded more sacrifices, blood drenched the room.

“Eeep... Ahhhhhhhhhh!”

“H-Hey, what...?”

“Don’t move.”

The last man still on his feet turned ghostly pale, with an expression of sheer terror unsuited to his manly visage, and he scrambled out of the room. The man sitting on the sofa tried to stop his subordinate as he escaped, but Inke brought the man up short by pressing his blood-soaked blade against his throat. The man chose not to get up from the sofa.

“H-Hey, do you have any idea who you’ve picked a fight with?!”

“Just how stupid are you? I’ve gotten the approval of Lord Sepaeda.” This was why bumpkins were a pain to deal with. “Do you really think you all can get away with picking a fight with House Sepaeda?”

Completely exasperated by the criminals he faced, he placed his dagger back on his hip. As Inke prepared to deal with any reinforcements, the man on the sofa began to panic.

“I get that you’re strong! I get it, so wait! Please, let me go! If not...!”

It was soon after the henchman had fled the room that something was thrown into the bar. When the object landed, the entire bar caught fire and began to burn.

“This place is rigged to go up!”

“Ah, I see. You aren’t all that important, are you, to be discarded so easily?”

Inke’s old friend, the one who had taken him to the bar, stared at the burning building. There were several dozen henchmen armed with polearms surrounding the building, shooing away any potential bystanders.

“Your ‘friend’ is a fool...to end up like this because he lost his temper.”

“Yes, indeed...”

“So, how do you intend to make up for this?” A middle-aged man who was probably rather high up in the organization glared sharply at Inke’s friend. “We let you handle it because you claimed the new combat instructor was your old friend. You cost us a bar and four men.”

“U-Um...”

“Don’t think you’ll die an easy death.”

The thugs around the two glared at the small fry who had been the cause of the whole incident. The small fry in question went deathly pale and looked like he was about to faint. Yes, there was a price to be paid by the man who had tried to drag his friend into misdeeds.

“Hm? H-Hey! Wait! Someone’s coming out!”

“That’s impossible! The building was built to collapse immediately!”

But the ones who were more to blame than the small fry were his superiors. They were guilty of far more egregious crimes than the lowly henchmen beneath them. They were far more deserving of punishment than the petty crooks.

“I have orders from Lord Sepaeda.”

Inke had escaped by cutting open the ceiling of the burning bar and flying out. He then slowly settled to the ground, avoiding the smoke and flames. Having casually escaped what should have been a lethal trap, he gazed coolly, ruthlessly, at those gathered around the building.

“If anyone tries to talk you into petty crimes, then kill them all as an example.” Inke tossed the four heads he held in his hands onto the ground. They were the heads of the four fools who had been in the bar, which he had taken the time to retrieve. “To show the truth of Sansui Shirokuro to those who don’t believe in his power.”

The several dozen men who surrounded the building, the middle-aged boss, the man who had once been his friend...

“Your heads are going to decorate the gate.”

They all understood that they were about to die.

“Well, that was a close call on your part.”

The heads and bodies of criminals littered the ground. They had all been beheaded while alive and the corpses had sprayed blood as they fell, drenching the ground. It looked like a scene straight out of hell.

“You were about to be killed by your boss.”

“Y-Yeah...”

Splattered with gore, Inke spoke to his friend, the sole survivor. From the friend’s perspective, Inke was a heartening sight. After all, Inke had killed the evildoers who had been threatening his friend. That said, Inke still had his sword in hand and didn’t look like he was going to sheath it, and there wasn’t a hint of humor in his eyes as he looked over at his friend.

“I’ll say it so there’s no misunderstanding, but I understand completely. You had no intention of killing me or fooling me, right?”

“Y-Yeah! Of course!”

“You intended to use me, but you didn’t mean to entrap me, right?”

“Th-That’s right! I-I just wanted to make a lot of money with you!”

There was no saving fools. Inke's friend had tried to drag his old pal, who had finally acquired a steady, honorable job, into a criminal enterprise. His motives were half greed and half genuinely intending to help Inke. The result, of course, had been disastrous.

"But I also know you were mocking me until now."

Inke knew that he was a fool. He didn't have any special potential like Saiga or Ran. No, he wasn't even anywhere close to Tahlán or Blois.

"You're an obvious screwup. I'm surprised you were even able to say you could buy me drinks."

Inke had just been lucky to survive. He knew that. He knew that he wasn't much different from the man in front of him.

"P-Please don't kill me!"

"Yes, of course. I won't kill you."

But there was a difference, a definite difference, between who he was now and the man before him. That, too, was obvious to him.

"I don't mind, really. Whether you get caught and tortured, then murdered by your organization after you're released... Or if you run away, only to get caught and murdered by your organization. Or if you run into the burning bar and kill yourself. None of it matters."

"Huh?"

"I won't kill you. Do as you wish." Inke used the noble treasure on his ankles to fly.

"Well done."

He thought back to the words uttered by the man who was far too great for him to feel comfortable addressing him as master.

"You're now a fully capable swordsman."

Yes, Inke had put in the effort. He wasn't the same as his old friend anymore.

"Congratulations on completing your training. I look forward to hearing about your work as a combat instructor."

He had his honor he had to uphold and protect, even if his opponent was as strong as one of the aces. Inke's old friend had tried to tarnish that honor. Even if he hadn't done it maliciously, even if he had done it out of ignorance, that didn't make the crime any lighter. That he had no intention of tarnishing that honor wasn't an excuse.

"Die as you wish."

Even if Inke's friend didn't know what Sansui looked like, he had tried to tar Sansui's name. That alone was worthy of death a thousand times over.

Part 24 — Violently Flipping

The slums in the Arcana Kingdom were where the poorest of the poor huddled together after being chased out of their farming villages. They were located near the glamor of the cities, but everyone within the slums scratched out a meager living, with no real hopes for the future.

“What the hell?! Explain yourselves!”

Lamp, one of Sansui’s students, hailed from this particular slum. Having graduated from a student to a combat instructor, he had returned home with high expectations. However, the only people awaiting him at the entrance to the slum were groups of brats, all under twenty years of age.

He had first been attacked by a group of five. That left Lamp wondering if there was some reason for the assault, and so he had defeated them while keeping an eye on his surroundings. Next came a group of about ten. At first, he had thought that group was the main body, but they had been completely lacking in coordination, so he recognized that they were unconnected to the first group and had defeated them all.

That group was then followed by a group of twenty, and as Lamp was fighting those twenty, their numbers swelled to double the original count. He had somehow managed to defeat them, but in the end, all of his caution had been wasted. The attackers had all been mere thugs who had attacked him without much in the way of purpose. He had been on guard, expecting a professional assassin to be hidden among one of the groups, but in the end, that had turned out to be an unnecessary worry.

“I’m pretty sure I didn’t piss off this many people!” Lamp shouted out rather childishly, but the faces he saw were all looking up at him in admiration. He had fought what seemed like a hundred delinquents and defeated them all without killing or even badly wounding anyone. While Lamp himself was currently throwing a bit of a tantrum, he had proved his mettle. The people who had witnessed the incident and the thugs who had attacked him all couldn’t help but shudder at his power.

“Just what the hell are you all thinking?!”

Lamp was well aware that crime was a problem in his hometown. He had expected people to try to swipe his wallet or try to intimidate him into handing over money. But he had never imagined he'd be attacked by this many people this quickly.

“Why did you attack me?! Answer me!”

“Um... We were told that if we beat you, we'd get a bag of gold.”

“Huh? No, I heard if I beat you I'd be able to get a job.”

“I was told that beating you would make me the kingdom's best swordsman...”

“I...”

“Hold on! What the hell are you all talking about?! Who spread all these ridiculous lies?!”

It had all been based on clearly fabricated information. The stories were so ridiculous that anyone, yes, even someone from the slums, could tell they were false. A piece of poetic irony was that it was Lamp's actual strength that lent those lies credibility. The children had been skeptical when they first attacked him, but were mistakenly convinced of the veracity of the stories when they saw how strong Lamp actually was. It had made them believe there was that much value in actually defeating him.

“Someone claiming to be your grandma...”

“That old haaaagggg!”

Lamp was immediately convinced they were telling the truth. This was definitely the sort of thing that greedy old hag would think of doing. Realizing what had happened, Lamp barely suppressed a snarl of irritation as he turned his back to his attackers and stalked off.

“Wh-What about us...?”

“I don't care. Get out of the way!”

Lamp completely ignored the children when they asked him what he intended

to do with them. He had been attacked by over a hundred of the little thugs, but they hadn't presented the slightest threat to him. It was the stuff of legends for the children of the slums, but the experience held no value for Lamp himself.

"Tch... That damned hag..."

Lamp simply left the people who had attacked him where they lay without extracting any revenge or demanding any payment. The act made no sense to the people of the slums. However, Lamp was now a combat instructor to a regional lord. He was a man who had to live according to a certain code of honor, and to him, the fact that his own grandmother had whipped up this crowd to assault him was an extraordinarily humiliating discovery. He needed to take care of this as quickly as possible to prevent it from getting any worse.

Lamp's family home was a ramshackle hut, one of dozens like it that lined the streets of the slums. He had no father or mother waiting for him in that house. The only resident waiting there was his extremely old grandmother.

"You haaagggggg!"

"Oh, welcome home, Lamp," a woman, looking rather more sprightly than her age might suggest, said cheerfully as Lamp walked in the door. She was dressed in surprisingly decent clothes for the slums.

"Based on that, it seems they already attacked you. Did you avoid fighting and run away? How embarrassing."

"No, I beat them all down!"

"That's impossible. There were at least ten of them, right?"

"There were over a hundred of them!"

"There's no way you could beat a hundred of them at once. You haven't changed at all. Still trying to put up a false facade no matter your age," the old woman said with a faint expression of exasperation.

What she was saying was perfectly reasonable, but it was infuriating for Lamp. He wanted to explain how he had grown much stronger than he had

been when he walked out of these slums. But, well, explaining that himself would look kind of pathetic, so he just silently slumped into a chair. It wasn't like she was going to believe him even if he told her.

"So, why did you send those brats up against me?"

"Well, it was all for you, of course. It was good advertising, right?"

"Just who the heck is it meant to advertise to?!"

"The people of this city, of course. You're gonna open a salle, right?"

The combat instructor for the regional lord was considered the best swordsman in that particular region. That meant the swordsman in question could then open a salle under his name to gather a great deal of students, and that provided a source of reputation and money. This was a perfectly legitimate thing for a combat instructor to do. Whether Lamp and the others wanted to do this or not was another matter entirely.

"If you're going to open a fencing salle, people would wanna see how well you fight, right?"

"Screw that. Neither I nor my comrades have any intention of opening a salle for a while."

"What? So, you're going to work for a pitiful little salary?"

"Pitiful? I mean, it's a lot more than anyone in this town makes, that's for sure."

People were beginning to gather around the ramshackle hut. Part of Lamp's attention was directed at the crowd gathering outside, but he was also aware that he was now famous, so he decided to let it slide for the moment.

"Besides, you're always so half-assed."

"What does that mean?!"

"You said you were going to become the kingdom's best swordsman, right?"

"Well, yeah..."

"If that was the case, then you should've actually become the best in the country before coming back..."

Lamp's grandmother wasn't trying to be cruel. She was simply quoting what Lamp had said before he had left the slums. It perhaps made sense to the ignorant that if Lamp was going to bother with a half-assed job like that of a regional lord's combat instructor, he could have put in the extra effort to go for being the best in the country.

"Don't be ridiculous... The real Sword Apostle is... Well, he's just beyond comprehension! Overwhelmingly strong!"

Lamp had seen the aces, not to mention Fukei and Suiboku, in battle. Frankly, he had to admit that he didn't have the nerve to try to keep up with those monsters. They weren't opponents that he could beat just by putting in the right amount of effort; they were so far beyond him that he couldn't muster the motivation to even try to challenge them.

"Besides, isn't it enough? It's enough to get us out of this slum."

"So, it's not a scam?"

"You didn't believe me?!"

"I figured the message to me was to get me to play along."

"Who were you planning to fool?! House Sepaeda's involved in this!"

Well, no, she was right. Given who he had been, it was understandable that she might consider his news to be a scam. Thinking back to when he had been a dumb youth in this slum, it was understandable that she hadn't believed him. Lamp scratched at his scalp as he let out a deep sigh.

"Wait, so you really are the regional combat instructor now?"

"Yeah... Look, before I found out you'd sent those thugs after me, I was planning to make sure you had a comfortable retirement."

Truth was stranger than fiction. The fact of the matter was that Lamp had seen a reality far more unrealistic, far more ridiculous, than any lie anyone could concoct. That was particularly true when it came to stories involving Suiboku.

"The five of us are going to be staying together, but we'll be living in a manor near the castle. Your dream was to live in a big manor house, right, grandma?"

“That’d be nice, even if it was a scam.”

“I keep telling you it’s not a scam... Wait, you’re wearing pretty nice clothes. I haven’t given you any money... Hey, who did you fool to get that money?”

“The ones out there.”

Lamp’s grandmother pointed to the paupers milling around outside the ramshackle hut. They were a motley collection made up of children dressed in rags, along with men and women in tattered clothing. They were all either people who wanted to find their child a place as a student of the combat instructor, or else children who hoped to work for someone in that sort of job.

“Hey, you lot! How much did you give this hag?!”

“What? You want me to repay it? I’ve already spent it all.”

“I’m saying I’ll repay them! If His Lordship or Master Sansui find out you committed such a stupid fraud, I’m going to end up losing my head! Literally!”

Lamp took out a wallet that was crammed full of coins. When the paupers saw the wallet, they held up one or two fingers. They were indicating the number of silver coins they had paid, going as far as borrowing money from relatives to finance their payment.

“Then this should do! You better be the only ones!”

Lamp handed out *gold* coins in twice the amount of the upheld fingers. The people in the crowd stared intently at the heft of the gold coins they were holding for the first time in their lives. They were struck with confusion as they were given money that amounted to several times their initial payment.

“Oh, come on... You shouldn’t throw money around like that...”

“Shut up! It’s my money and I’ll spend it like I want! Besides, I’m going to work for His Lordship, so emptying my wallet isn’t a problem!”

Perhaps drawn by Lamp’s loud argument with his grandmother, the thugs that had attacked him earlier began to gather around the ramshackle hut.

“Don’t underestimate who I’ve become!”

Lamp didn’t notice the new throng of onlookers as he puffed out his chest at

his grandmother.

“I’m a...student! A student of Sansui Shirokuro, ace of House Sepaeda, one of the Four Great Houses of the Arcana Kingdom!”

He couldn’t quite bring himself to call himself an apprentice of Sansui, but he was confident in the rest of his claims.

“I’m a man who had Master Suiboku, Master Sansui’s master, make him a bunch of noble treasures as equipment, then got a letter of recommendation from Lord Sepaeda himself, and will now be taking on the role of combat instructor for the regional lord! I’m not going to steal from the people of the slums...”

He was clearly stating that he was no longer one of the residents of the slums.

“I’m not going to go around doing petty crap like stealing from paupers!” Lamp shouted proudly as he finished paying out sufficient gold coins such that each pauper had received at least ten times the money they had paid his grandmother. It marked him completely apart from the residents of the slums, given that they had barely been able to make the initial payments by saving, scrounging, and borrowing.

“Grandma, we’re going to live in a mansion by the castle! You get what that means, right?! Don’t embarrass me in front of His Lordship or my coworkers! Don’t do anything embarrassing in front of them!”

“So, you’ve gotten to be so important that you can say things like that, eh?”

The greedy hag was surprised to find that the grandson who had been nothing but a petty thug had grown into a proper adult with a nice salary. Of course, he was still talking like the slum rat he had been...

“Besides, at salles, evidently they charge a monthly tuition fee, not a one-time fee. That’s the sort of business for rich people. I can’t take apprentices just because a poor brat in the slums paid me once. Besides, I’ve still got a lot left to learn. When Master Sansui returns to the kingdom, I’m going back to the royal capital to have him train me again.”

Lamp thought back to Sansui’s reluctance to take on apprentices. Until he had watched Suiboku fight, Lamp had thought Sansui had simply been modest when

he had claimed he was nowhere near his master's level, but Suiboku had been far more incredible, far more overwhelming, than he had even dared to imagine.

Yes, in comparison to Suiboku, Sansui still had much to learn. In which case, Lamp, who was nowhere near Sansui's level, was in no position to take apprentices himself. He understood that teaching was a proper part of being a combat instructor, but he wanted to confine his instruction to a handful of people. Not that he was doing so out of an abundance of caution, of course.

"So, the next ten years will be spent training, I think. Once I'm done with that, my buddies and I can build a salle after getting permission from Master Sansui."

Lamp seemed to thoroughly enjoy talking about his future. He was certain he would be even happier ten years from now than he was today. That belief, that hope for the future, was something no one in these slums possessed.

"I don't know if you'll still be alive by then, grandma, but at the very least, life's going to be easy from here on out. Don't do anything like trying to scam the people here."

Lamp, who was dressed oddly in his noble treasures, smiled at the people who peered in through the ramshackle hut's windows and door.

"Sorry that my grandma tried to scam you guys. Beating me won't make you the kingdom's best swordsman, and I'm not taking apprentices." With that, he stood up from his chair. "Grandma, I've got money and the day's still young. Let's just get out of this town and go to our new house. I'm pretty sure it's bigger than the farmhouse you lived in when you were younger."

Lamp took his grandmother's wrinkled hand and led the old woman forward. He tried to leave the hut. When he ran into the group of paupers surrounding the ramshackle hut, he tried to disperse them.

"You can do what you want with the stuff inside the hut, so get out of the way. We're going to leave this town... Hm?"

But none of them moved out of the way.

"Please make him your apprentice."

“You don’t have to give me back the money, so please make me your apprentice.”

“Please, take this child out of this place!”

“Please introduce my child to your master!”

“Please, we want to leave this place!”

“I’m sure my son can become great like you!”

“You’re super strong!”

“I wanna be strong like you!”

“Make me your apprentice! I’ll gather the money somehow!”

“I want to become a combat instructor too!”

“If we can’t become your apprentices, then at least introduce us to your master!”

“I want to give my son a future! A ten years from now of his own!”

“We want to change!”

Standing there was a group of people, each of whom he had once been. They were all like the person he had been before he had left these slums.

“And?”

Meaning, he was facing a bunch of beggars.

“What specifically can you do?”

They were all small fry who could do nothing but beg for handouts and help.

“Can you say yes if I order you to do this or that?”

“Yeah, of course!”

“We’ll do whatever you say!”

“If they’re orders from someone as successful as you!”

“Give us your orders!”

The local thugs all shouted out to him. They were shouts of truth, but they were depressingly pointless, depressingly worthless, shouts of desperation. All

of them sincerely believed what they were saying, none of them were lying in the slightest, and none of them had the faintest intention of betraying Lamp. However...

“Then if I told you go get the head of a guy a lot stronger than me, can you do it?”

“D-Don’t be mean!”

“Yeah, there’s no way we could beat someone way stronger than you!”

“We could manage if we had those weird weapons you’ve got, right?”

“We’ll follow you! So protect us! That’s what we’re asking for!”

Yes. They wouldn’t even be useful as suicide warriors. They were simply fools who had no imagination or ability to think. There was no value in continuing the conversation.

“You don’t want to suffer, you don’t want to be afraid, and you don’t want to get hurt or die.”

There was nothing wrong with that in and of itself.

“Then go ask someone else.”

But he was the wrong person to ask, in that case.

“All you’re willing to do is ask someone else to fix your problems for you. You think that if you pay a pitiful amount of money, someone else will make everything better. That’s why you got scammed by a greedy old hag like her.”

His job, his comrades’ jobs, hadn’t changed in that regard. Even if he was now a combat instructor, he wasn’t allowed to avoid fighting people who were much stronger than he was.

“If it’s your child? Figure out a way to give them a future by yourself. If it’s you? Then figure it out for yourself.”

If they wanted an easy life, if they wanted a safe life, then it was a mistake to chase after him.

“There’s no way I’d introduce people who’d run away when told to fight, people who’d hide behind my back, to a martial house like House Sepaeda!”

They wanted someone to fix things and they were even relying on someone else to come up with the actual solution. That was exactly why these people were stuck in the slums. Lamp had grown, but it hadn't turned him into a saint with infinite compassion, and he couldn't help but look down upon the paupers from his hometown with contempt as he yelled at them.

Part 25 — Devotion

After listening quietly through each of the five stories, Sansui couldn't bear it any longer as they reached the end of Inke's story. He pinched the bridge of his nose, turning his head downward. The worst part about the stories was that he could completely sympathize with each of them, and each of their stories were all perfectly easy to understand. The way the people around each of the five reacted when they had returned with news of their success was perfectly natural. It wasn't that those people were strange or aberrations, it was simply that the five and Sansui were unable to humor them. While there were a number of actual villains among those people, most of the others were well within the range of acceptable behavior.

"I don't know what I can say."

"Right...?"

Cabbo was the one who agreed particularly enthusiastically with Sansui's words. The others had some reason to complain about the people from their homelands. But Cabbo, who had been welcomed with celebrations and open arms, really wasn't in a position to criticize how he had been greeted. Still, they all understood why he found that treatment embarrassing.

"I used to hate how snooty people in the upper classes were, but...now that I've gained a certain amount of rank myself, I'm starting to understand how people look at you when you have authority..."

Cabbo, the one who had been held up with reverence in his backwater hometown, was the one who felt most pained by the situation. The people of his hometown were all trying to exploit Cabbo's advancement for their own gain.

"When I actually started my job, I started getting lots of letters...asking to help with tax evasion, or to rat out a neighboring village, or get them an exemption from forced labor..."

"Those are all undoubtedly crimes..."

Cabbo wasn't exactly an admirable individual himself. He had been quite the

little terror when he had lived in his hometown, and he had stolen his parents' money when he had left town, so he was also a thief. Further, he had probably committed crimes along the way, before he had the good fortune to meet Sansui. While he had gained an official position and been pardoned for his past crimes, his resume was hardly spotless. For him to be disgusted by the petty crimes of ordinary people was, in a sense, a form of hypocrisy.

At the very least, the people of his homeland would probably regard it as the height of hypocrisy for someone like Cabbo—who had done whatever he wanted, when he wanted, causing problems to all and sundry—to suddenly object to minor crimes like tax evasion. The logic was perfectly sound. After all, Cabbo had killed people on his way to advancement, but now he was objecting to helping people dodge a tax payment... Their reasoning was sound and it was, to an extent, understandable, but if Cabbo actually did help them, he'd lose his head. Not just figuratively, as Sansui would go and chop it off to take responsibility for Cabbo's wrongdoing.

"Still... I'm sure you've already discussed it with your employer."

"Yes... He laughed dryly and said he'd pretend not to notice for a bit... That he'd let it go if they decided to give up on their schemes."

"Do you think they'll give up?"

"They haven't given up at all. If anything, they've started writing more letters... They're even sending letters directly to His Lordship's estate..."

"Those're some impressively bold requests for tax evasion..."

"It was enough to make me want to go and kill them myself... It gave me a good understanding of what it would feel like for you to have to come kill us if we misbehaved..."

Cabbo shed no tears. He had gone from sadness to flat-out exasperation. He had always thought he was the worst of the worst in his hometown and that the others, while poor, were ordinary, good people. That hadn't been the case at all. Many of the people in his hometown had been villainous in their own way. They simply hadn't had the opportunity to commit any crimes, and when they were presented with a golden opportunity, they pounced to make sure they could exploit it.

“Woulnut’s the lucky one... I mean, with a rich family and all. After all, your little brother came and apologized to you afterward, right?”

“Well, yeah, he did apologize, but...”

“You’re so lucky, Woulnut, to have a family that’s not trying to drag you into their criminal schemes. Don’t you guys agree?”

Woulnut squirmed as Cabbo commented on his situation with a sour expression. Evidently, Cabbo was extremely envious of the fact that Woulnut had a good, normal family.

“Yeah, agreed. Compared to Woulnut’s dad and brother, my grandma... She’s loud and she’s embarrassing to have around. I should’ve left her in the slums.” Lamp, who had brought his grandmother to the home provided to him, joined Cabbo in enviously needling Woulnut. “Can you believe it, Master Sansui? My grandma always nags me about taking her to parties and balls. Even today, all I said was that I was going to visit my boss, which she thought meant I was going to a party, and she threw quite a fit... She kept nagging me to take her along...”

“I-It would have been fine if you had brought her. It would have been nice to have her meet my daughter... And I’m several times her age...”

“No, that would have been a bad idea! My grandma is still... I don’t know how to put it, still dreaming of hitting it big? She thinks she’s still got a big chance to strike it rich! Despite the fact that she’s pretty much done!”

No, I’m trying to say it’s not much different for me... It makes me sad just thinking about it...

Sansui understood what Lamp was saying, but Sansui himself wasn’t much better, given that he was a lot older. If anything, he was worse. Perhaps there was an ethical problem with marrying a woman four hundred and eighty years his junior, having a happy married life, and even having a child with her.

But, wait, Lamp’s grandmother met Lamp’s grandfather when she was younger, and I’m sure she was happy after having Lamp’s dad or mom... I didn’t have that when I was younger, so...I’m allowed this much... Right?

“Um, hey, Lamp, that’s enough about you.”

“Yeah... You’re bothering Master Sansui.”

Yuen and Inke stopped Lamp as they noticed Sansui’s mood plummeting. Their master was a man with a strong sense of restraint and propriety, so when he saw other people embarrassing themselves in public, or even when he heard about such things, he couldn’t help but compare himself to them. His students were well aware of that fact and so they hurriedly intervened to stop Lamp from driving Sansui further into gloom.

“Well... Perhaps we can stop talking about personal matters for now and discuss work...”

“Your work as combat instructors, yes? How is that going?”

Sansui was the supreme combat instructor of House Sepaeda, so it was his responsibility to direct and instruct the five of them in their endeavors. Even though it was technically his job to actually listen to them talk about their jobs, Sansui was actually eager to hear their stories. That prospect seemed to be a lot more enjoyable than listening to complaints about their personal lives.

Yuen looked a tad uncomfortable despite being the one who had broached the subject. After all, the five of them had come to congratulate Sansui on his daughter’s birth; it felt a bit wrong to force him to talk about work on this occasion. Still, since Sansui had perked up at the change in subject and because he couldn’t think of anything else to talk about, Yuen decided the subject would serve for the time being.

“I’m primarily working on instructing the young heir to the title, but it’s been a struggle. He’s not taking his swordsmanship very seriously yet.”

“That’s probably unavoidable. It depends on how old he is, but it’s hard to be motivated to do something you’re not interested in. I’m sure you’re all aware of that.”

Just as there were children who hated studying, there were also children who hated exercise, and there were children who hated all lessons indiscriminately. Sansui acknowledged the difficulty in dealing with children in general. Evidently, the comment about not being motivated to do something someone had no interest in struck particularly close to home for Woulnut and he winced as he spoke up.

“Yes, but it’s still our job to teach them. Besides, if we can’t hone their skills properly, it besmirches your name.”

“While I would like to say you don’t need to worry about it...given that I’ve taken on the role of supreme combat instructor, I can’t quite say that, can I?”

When Sansui had been a bodyguard, his only job was protecting Douve, and anything else had been a minor matter, unimportant, not worth his attention. While failure wasn’t something Sansui was generally connected to, he could get away with being yelled at if he failed at a minor task of one sort or another. On the other hand, if he had failed in his mission of protecting Douve and she had been hurt, he wouldn’t have been able to complain if he had been killed by way of punishment.

Going from being a bodyguard to an instructor meant that, while he had been freed from his daily guard duties, he was now responsible for fighting instruction across all of House Sepaeda. He wasn’t in a position where he could tell instructors not to worry about the outcome of their instruction.

“Since it’s sword instruction, I’m sure you can’t avoid a bit of roughness every now and then. But think carefully about when that’s necessary. If you cause excessive pain, that’s mere violence, not proper instruction.”

“I’ve been very careful in that regard. The lad isn’t much different in age from Lain. Or, rather, I don’t know how harsh to be, so I’ve been really cautious about how I proceed.”

“Since this is your first time in the role, I think that sounds about right. I believe for the rest, it’s best to discuss it with the lord who’s employing you.”

“Indeed. Fortunately, His Lordship is being very patient. He even gave permission for all of us to come visit you today... As having no plan at all is a bad idea, I thought I’d ask you for your advice, but the boy is... Oh.”

There was no special meaning to the “oh” uttered by Yuen, but it seemed he had suddenly remembered something in the middle of his sentence. The other four also looked uncomfortable. Watching their discomfort, even Sansui started to feel uneasy.

“Is something...the matter?”

“Well... The young lord is really interested in our noble treasures...”

The noble treasures were equipment that allowed anyone to wield the Immortal Arts, which Sansui’s master, Suiboku, had crafted for his apprentice’s students. With those treasures, even a child could fly or move like the wind. Of course a child would be interested in them.

“I see...”

Sansui himself found it difficult to accept the existence of those noble treasures and the fact that Suiboku could craft them at all. Suiboku’s ability to let anyone use the techniques Sansui had spent hundreds of years learning still irked him. His expression clouded at the mention of those noble treasures in the conversation.

“But that’s enough about work, Master Sansui! Let’s talk about little Miss Fanne! I’d love to hear more about her from you, Master Sansui!”

“Very well, then.”

Inke, noticing Sansui’s change in expression, forcefully changed the subject. Sansui seized the opportunity and began talking about the new topic at hand. However, even that shift in topic didn’t change how Sansui had fled from discussing the noble treasures, and he felt a stab of embarrassment at the fact.

I suppose I still have a lot of training left to do...

All six men present were aware of, and ashamed of, their failings, their immaturity, and their weaknesses. It simply meant that for them, living required continual training and effort. The combat instructors had set aside fighting for the moment to focus on other matters, but all swore that they would devote themselves anew to their training.

Part 26 — Omen

Lord Sepaeda, Douve's older brother, was spending time in the royal capital with Tahlán, Douve, and his father, the Lord Emeritus of House Sepaeda. While he had been given a summary of the events that had occurred on the journey and subsequent stay in Magyan beforehand, hearing the stories directly from the three of them gave him a distinctly different impression than simply reading the events unfold on a page.

"Douve dressed as a bride. On the one hand, I'm sad, but on the other, I'm glad I missed it..."

"She was beautiful."

"That goes without saying. I have no doubt about that. But...seeing her marry is less straightforward."

It seemed his first observations had to do with his younger sister's wedding.

"Still...I never expected to hear that Saiga would be able to hold his own against Sansui."

Lord Sepaeda had witnessed the third fight between Sansui and Saiga directly and there had been a part of him, at the time, that had wanted to see Sansui struggle against an opponent, but Sansui had quickly squashed that hope. Lord Sepaeda had heard that Saiga, despite being completely overpowered by Sansui, hadn't let it break him, and had continued to train and improve himself. If that effort had finally borne fruit, Lord Sepaeda had to admit that he felt a certain respect toward the young heir to House Batterabbe.

"In all honesty, there were times when I found myself worried about Sansui. Well, we were worried, but Sansui just had to dust himself off."

"If it was enough to worry you, given how well you know Sansui and his abilities, I'm sure it was even worse for those around you. It's good that Saiga left a strong impression on the people of Batterabbe, but it would be another thing entirely if that was at the cost of Sansui's reputation. If they fought evenly and overwhelmed everyone who watched the fight, then that's the best possible outcome we could hope for."

Lord Sepaeda had a deeply held desire that Sansui Shirokuro the swordsman be known as an overwhelmingly strong warrior, a warrior without peer in the kingdom, or even in the world. And that desire, that wish, had continually been granted by Sansui's overwhelming strength. Sansui Shirokuro was the swordsman that a lord's dreams were made of, the ultimate swordsman who served the great martial house, loyally following the lord's orders and never disobeying.

But at the same time, there was a part of Lord Sepaeda who had wanted to see Sansui put in all of his effort, fight with all of his available skill, and win after a hard-fought battle. That was not, of course, a wish that Sansui become weaker. It was simply that he wanted Sansui to have an opponent that he couldn't simply take down in the blink of an eye, someone who would make Sansui work for his victory.

When Saiga had first appeared, when Lord Sepaeda had seen his sheer talent and possession of Eckesachs, he had hoped that Saiga would be the one. It had taken a bit longer than expected, but Saiga had now grown into that role. Saiga becoming a worthy rival for Sansui was a good thing, both for Sansui himself and for Lord Sepaeda.

"Still, he better not have lost."

With all that said, he still didn't want Sansui to actually fail. Based on the conversation, it had probably been a draw, but Lord Sepaeda put forward the idea, just to be sure.

"We stopped it at the right moment, so there was no actual winner or loser. However, if they had continued the fight, Saiga would probably have collapsed first."

While Saiga possessed multiple forms of energy, he still had a limit to how much he had of each. If he continued to use each of them, he would eventually exhaust that supply. By contrast, Sansui only had ki as a source of power. However, ki itself was extremely efficient, and Sansui never wasted his ki with unnecessary moves. He used the bare minimum necessary to dodge, to block, and to attack, and he was always far from exhausting his reserves. As such, had that duel continued, Saiga would have run out of energy first. Saiga himself had

admitted as much.

“I see... I’m relieved to hear it. I don’t know what I would have done if I heard from you, father, that Sansui would have lost if they had continued...”

Before Sansui had departed for Magyan, he had fought and lost to his master, Suiboku. That had been perfectly natural, but it was still not something he enjoyed thinking back on. Even though Lord Sepaeda realized that the loss had helped hone Sansui’s skills and made him even stronger, he still couldn’t help but feel conflicted about it. He understood that he was being unreasonable and that he was unhappy whether Sansui’s opponents were too weak, equal to him, or stronger than him. He knew that he was pushing excessive expectations upon Sansui, when the Sword Apostle was already doing plenty to fulfill his responsibilities to House Sepaeda. No, he was just being selfish and childish. The only one who really burdened Sansui with any sort of expectations was probably Suiboku.

“That’s enough about this subject, I think. Tahlan... I’m sorry to hear about your mother.”

“No, it wasn’t just my mother’s responsibility. You have my apologies. The inability of my siblings to settle matters on their own forced the Arcana Kingdom to intervene,” Tahlan, who had been silently apologetic, replied briefly.

“It is true that it was properly the responsibility of those involved to settle the matter of succession. Even so, that experience was important in helping Saiga and the others grow. It sounds like those from the Tempera Village did well as well... If anything, it might have worked out for the best,” Lord Sepaeda said, giving his honest, unfiltered opinion. Tahlan actually appreciated the fact that it was a plain, unexceptional observation.

“I thank you for your tact. The Arcana Kingdom has spent a great deal of money and time on our marriages. I feel nothing but shame for how embarrassingly sloppy things were in my homeland...”

“If you feel that way, then the best thing to do is make a success of your next wedding. It seems you were extremely popular within your homeland, but you’ve also raised quite a stir around here.”

With that, Lord Sepaeda showed Tahlan a basket filled with piles of letters. They were all letters addressed to the Magyan swordsman from neighboring countries.

“You stopped in various countries on your way to Magyan, remember? It seems there are many women who can’t even sleep after having spoken with you, and I’ve gotten letters from their fathers and brothers.”

“I-I see... That was rather common around my homeland, but...”

“When you were in Magyan, you were the eldest son of the First Consort. Here in Arcana, you’re the husband of the daughter of House Sepaeda. No doubt that has something to do with it.”

Tahlan looked distinctly uncomfortable. Despite the fact that he was the one marrying into the family, this state of affairs made it look like he had gone around wooing women left, right, and center. Of course, Tahlan hadn’t expressed interest in any of the women he had met on his journey and, if anything, had been stuck to Douve like glue, making sure to mention at every available opportunity that they were going to Magyan to bring news of their marriage. Yet, in spite of that, women still sought to get closer to him. Of course, none of that changed the reality of the situation. However, while Tahlan had thought the Sepaeda family would be angry, none of the three seemed particularly moved. In fact, Douve seemed to be enjoying it, smirking as she watched him.

“If you were guilty of anything, Sansui would have killed you, or I would have done it myself. I know full well you’re not that much of a fool.”

“I don’t doubt my father’s judgment. Besides, given how you only have eyes for my sister, I can’t imagine you’d find any other woman worthy of your attention.”

“What would be the fun without this sort of attention, mm? I’ve married such a wonderful man, and I’d hate for it to pass without all sorts of envy directed my way.”

“I really have been fortunate in finding a new family...”

As was their character, the members of House Sepaeda remained firm and

unflappable. Even though a man who had married into their family was being courted by other women, they didn't consider it to be a problem in the slightest. All they required of Tahlan was that he be strong and love Douve. So long as he fulfilled those requirements, they couldn't care less about how others viewed him. Tahlan, with his penchant for worrying about how others felt, truly appreciated their strength in that regard.

"Even then... Even if it makes a connection with House Sepaeda, I'm still a man who's married into this family. Besides, I'm a prince of a kingdom that's not well known in the area. Am I truly someone anyone would want to marry?"

Because Tahlan was from a far-distant kingdom, his facial features were quite different from the norm for this region. Given that many people tended to dislike those who were different from themselves, just why was he drawing this much attention? Tahlan, who knew both the good and bad parts of human nature well, couldn't understand this point.

"I understand what you're trying to say. It seemed excessive at first to me as well. But thinking about how the Arcana Kingdom has changed lately, it's started to make more sense."

The Arcana Kingdom had forced the Domino Republic, a country of the same size, to submit as a satellite country, acquired all of the Eight Sacred Treasures, and recently started gathering up hitherto unknown Rare Art wielders. Arcana had always been a great power, but it was now starting to grow into a superpower. It was understandable that many countries would seek ties with Arcana through whatever method they could find.

"And there are several countries that have taken other measures."

The countries trying to send their daughters out to marry into Arcanian houses were at least trying diplomacy. It stood to reason that there would also be countries that tried to acquire the secrets that the Arcana Kingdom possessed by force.

"What happened?"

The Lord Emeritus's expression tensed as he detected the shadow crossing his son's features.

“Several countries sent spies into our kingdom to try to steal noble treasures, Coiled Peaches, and Divine Ginseng.”

“That makes sense... The Coiled Peaches and Divine Ginseng go without saying, but even the noble treasures, while not terribly flashy, are also extremely useful devices.”

“There were plenty of people within the kingdom who wanted them... I’m sure it was easy for them to find collaborators...”

Daughter and father weren’t particularly surprised that such machinations had occurred. If anything, they had expected such things from the start, which was why they had forbidden any trade in those items and placed restrictions on their use. If they had been honest, they would have preferred not to distribute the items even to Sansui’s students.

“Did anyone actually get some?”

“Of course not. Our kingdom isn’t so foolish that we’d let someone steal objects that we knew they wanted to steal. While we weren’t able to capture all of the operatives, we did protect all of the treasures.”

Putting aside the items used by Sansui’s students, the other treasures had been under constant guard from the start. That, of course, meant that it was public knowledge where they were kept, but the kingdom had maintained a level of security that guaranteed their safety. None of the operatives had even laid so much as a finger on the treasures. That made sense, given that there weren’t anything like super-thieves with extraordinary thieving powers or the like. With enough security, it was pretty much impossible to steal objects that were under heavy guard.

“Then why do you look so troubled, brother? Nothing happened, yes?”

“Several countries took a step that we weren’t expecting.” The color drained from Lord Sepaeda’s face. His expression indicated better than his words that something dire had happened while Sansui and the others had been away. “The noble treasures, the Coiled Peaches, the Divine Ginseng... There were those who sought to steal not the objects themselves, but the creator of those objects...”

It would be one thing if they had Danue or Ungaikyo, but otherwise, stealing just one of the objects in question wasn't particularly helpful. As such, it was worth much more to wrest away the creator of those items.

"You're not saying...?" Douve's expression twitched as she guessed what had happened. She wasn't the only one. Both Tahlan and the Lord Emeritus paled as well.

"Yes... They went after Master Suiboku, the creator of those items."

They had completely missed the possibility that there would be those who would try to kidnap Suiboku, wielder of the Medicinal Arts and crafter of the noble treasures. It was an option that no one in the Arcana Kingdom would have even contemplated taking.

"To go after Master Suiboku... I don't know if that's brave or just foolish..."

"Yes... Just hearing about it sent a chill up my spine."

Having captured all his assailants, Suiboku had evidently said, "To think they believed they could capture me with so few individuals... They must not think much of me." The operatives could do nothing but admit they had underestimated him, but they remained ignorant of the true meaning behind Suiboku's words. They remained blissfully unaware that their very countries faced destruction.

"Master Suiboku is more dangerous than anyone or anything..."

For those who didn't know the man Suiboku, it was understandable that they had interpreted his words to mean the operatives had underestimated him. That was the danger with the ignorant. They truly didn't know just how dangerous a game they were playing...

Side Story — As a Father

I know it's a lot of work to become a parent. It means not only creating the child, but also raising them. Children, especially babies, are very weak and fragile creatures. That is why parents need to live with an appropriate awareness about needing to protect the baby. It's not enough to just feed the baby; there's a lot of other work involved with child-rearing, like dealing with

their colic and changing their diapers. In the world I was born in, all this was considered the job of the parents, but I'm pretty sure that everyone knew that it was too hard for just the parents on their own. As such, it was probably something that people around them helped out with, and it was known to be problematic when the father simply laid all the responsibility upon the mother.

Of course, I have no intention of leaving everything to the mother in this case. Given that this is our first child, I'm sure the labor was really hard on Blois, and when I got home, I was fully prepared to shoulder the entire burden on my own. At least, that's what I was prepared to do. The reality is actually quite a bit different.

"My, my, Lady Fanne. Are you hungry?"

"Probably not! She probably needs a fresh diaper!"

"No, it seems both of you are wrong... Let's pick you up and have a walk."

I'm currently at the Wynne family estate and Fanne is with us, of course. However, as far as who's actually taking care of Fanne, it's not Blois or me, but the wet nurses employed by House Wynne. There are three of them, each taking turns caring for her, and when necessary, the other servants in the house come to support them. As such, there's a perfect support system already set up to take care of her.

Blois isn't actually doing most of the caregiving, the caregivers aren't doing it alone, and, as might be expected, there's no room for my involvement either. All I'm doing is occasionally holding Fanne. Otherwise, I don't deal with any of the hard work of caring for her. Now, if we zoom out a little, I suppose you could say that the money I'm earning from my work is how we're able to afford the wet nurses to take care of Fanne, but their direct employers are Blois's parents, so...even if I give the Wynne family money, I'm not sure I can say that I'm the one supporting Fanne. All I'm able to do right now is watch as my own daughter is taken care of by other people.

"Hey, Sansui... I'm not saying what you're doing is wrong, but you should probably lay off for a bit."

"That's right, papa. I feel bad for them right now."

All I'm doing is looking at my own daughter from a distance, but my wife and other daughter are treating me like a suspicious character. Wait, this is my wife's family home. There's no reason I should be treated like this.

"Listen... They're doing their jobs. And, technically, you're one of their employers. You'd be really nervous if your employer constantly watched you work, right?"

Blois makes a perfectly valid point. It would be one thing if I was there to hold Fanne, but watching them while they're caring for her is definitely verging into keeping an eye on their work. So, that's why they keep glancing this way and their auras seem a little nervous.

"Papa, you might not realize this... But, papa, you're the country's best swordsman and the rumor is you're really strong... So, I think it's probably scary to have you watching them."

My daughter's observation lets me look at myself more objectively. It seems I'm not a suspicious figure, but a dangerous one. Given that there was a time when the royal capital was decorated by the heads of people I'd killed, I suppose it's natural that they're afraid of me.

"I see... Then let's go somewhere else for a bit."

When I say that and take Blois and Lain to another room, I feel the wet nurses relax. Ah, yes, my presence was what was making them nervous. As we're moving rooms, I decide to tell Blois and Lain what's been on my mind. As a father, it's important that I check with my family on things that are bothering me.

"Hey, you two... What should I be doing for Fanne? You know, as a father."

I wonder how my wife and daughter will react to my serious question.

"You don't need to think so seriously about it. You just need to hold her and play with her."

"That's right, papa. That's all you need to do!"

I'm caught in a bind because the bar they're setting is far too low. I mean, even I, an Immortal, think babies are cute. If that wasn't the case, I probably

wouldn't have adopted Lain as a baby. However, in my view, a father that does nothing but coo over his baby and doesn't actually do any of the hard work is a terrible father. I mean, if I wanted to phrase it maliciously, Blois, as the mother, is leaving most of the work to others and isn't doing much work either. Of course, she's already done plenty of heavy lifting, what with giving birth, and hasn't fully recovered yet, so...I feel like I'm the only one who isn't really doing anything. I feel unfulfilled as a father. I want to do something for Fanne.

"Hey, papa, what was it like with me?"

"It wasn't much different with you. Though I was Lady Douve's bodyguard at the time..."

"Yeah... Honestly, you really didn't have the time to take care of her."

Since Blois and I were the only two people serving as Lady Douve's bodyguards at the time, I was too busy to really feel any fatherly obligations. To get to the heart of the matter: basically, I have lots of free time right now, and as a result I feel the need to be engaged as a father. When Lain was a baby, I was hard at work because I knew I needed to support her, but now there's no pressure at all in that regard.

"I understand how you feel. I was also really bored when you left for Magyan and before I found out I was pregnant. Or rather, not bored, just feeling really strange that I didn't have anything to do..."

At times like this, Blois shows that she really understands me. She always felt like her training and escort work were burdens, but when those things disappeared, she suddenly found herself at a loss about what to do. The pregnancy took care of that void for her, though. I guess this is probably true for me too. I need something else to occupy my time, so I don't feel like I'm not attending to my fatherly duties.

"Don't stress out over it. The important thing is you're here."

"Yes, but I don't think it's a good thing to let this time go to waste either..."

I mean, it's not like this free time is going to last forever, especially given that Lady Douve's wedding ceremony here in Arcana is going to happen soon. After that, I need to accompany my master to his homeland, then after that I have to

start my job as a combat instructor. As such, I want to make the most of the time I have right now. I think that's only natural under the circumstances.

"I'll be busy again in a little bit, so..."

That one point is the difference between me and Blois, who is retired, and Lain, who is still a child. When I say that, Blois and Lain start fussing over me. I feel like I'll end up regretting it later if all I do is spend time just playing with Fanne. I want to find the best way to spend time with my adorable baby daughter. I don't want to regret a missed opportunity once this time is gone.

With that in mind, I decide to go get advice from Blois's family. Both Blois's older sister and older brother already have children, meaning that Lain and Fanne have lots of cousins, while Blois and I have lots of nieces and nephews. As such, both Hetter and Chette have more experience than I do as parents. They're good people to ask about how I should spend my limited free time with my daughter. I first go to Hetter, who lives in the same house as we do, when he has a bit of free time.

"I see... How to interact with your children when you have free time." Hetter furrows his brow when he hears my question.

"I know it's kind of an enviable problem to have..."

"Yes, I envy you... When my children were born, I was happy on the one hand, but there was also a part of me that was embarrassed at just being comfortable in my current position..."

"I-I see..."

"Though that's the same now, really..."

I understand at this moment that I'm asking the wrong person. My worry is a simple one. It's not the sort of thing to inquire about with someone who is struggling with the work he's supposed to inherit from his parents. Still, it'd be the height of rudeness to just turn around and leave right now just because it's clear that it's not going to be a productive conversation. Since we're now family, I can't afford to cause friction over something so silly.

"Still, I'm not much different from you. Unlike Chette, my children were born

after our family was promoted. Life had gotten quite a bit easier, and we left most of the children's care to the wet nurses."

I had approached the conversation relatively lightly, but Hetter's answer was a lot heavier than I expected. The Wynne family was originally in charge of a different territory, one that was much poorer, and their standard of living at the time had also been equally poor. Noble families weren't rich just because they held a title. At the very least, the Wynnes hadn't always been rich. It was only when Blois was hired as Lady Douve's bodyguard that they had been given their current prosperous lands to rule. I guess back when they were poor, they had so little wealth that even affording a wet nurse was a struggle. Blois really had borne a heavy burden on her shoulders. I understand more than ever why her parents want me to make her happy.

"Really, it was more that I would complain to my wife and she would comfort me..."

"I-I see..."

Oh dear, this conversation is even less helpful than I thought. As Hetter says, I'm considered by everyone to be this kingdom's greatest swordsman, and everything is going well in both my public and private lives. That's exactly why I have the luxury of worrying about something like how to spend my free time with my daughter. Meanwhile, Hetter is dealing with the more serious problem of being an heir not trusted by his own father... That hasn't changed much in the last year or so. In fact, his parents trust Lyra, his little sister, more than they do him. Given that, Hetter's still dealing with the struggles he had when his children were first born.

"But both then and now, my children are a source of strength. Even if I'm young by society's standards, I'm their one and only father. I do my best to be a father that they can be proud of."

"That's a wonderful thing!"

"I'm sure that's not something you ever worry about... You have the approval of your master, the world's most powerful man; you're trusted by Lord Sepaeda; and everyone considers you the kingdom's greatest..."

"N-Not at all. I mean, I don't even know how to interact properly with my own

daughter...”

“I doubt you can ever understand how I feel...”

Oh no, now it feels like I’m just here to torment him. At this rate, it’ll just end with me boasting about my own happiness. Or rather, Hetter is taking it in that direction with his own self-deprecation. This guy really is a pain... Maybe it’s a sign that he trusts me, but I feel like this isn’t the right way to show his trust...

“The other day, Master Suiboku came to visit to check in on Blois...and that caused quite the stir... I was nothing but a leaf blown away by that storm...”

“D-Did my master cause problems?”

“No... There was nothing of that sort. But, even so, everyone around me treated me like a link to you and Master Suiboku... In a way, that was what I had wanted, but it’s quite hollow to be in that position in reality.”

Oh, right, from what I recall hearing, Hetter was trying to maneuver things so that Blois and I getting married would work to House Wynne’s advantage. He wanted to make me take the Wynne name, call myself Sansui Wynne, and become part of House Wynne. I honestly don’t care all that much and there’s a part of me that’s fine with that arrangement, but evidently it’s actually kind of inadvisable. That’s because I myself am higher in importance than House Wynne. I hate saying it, but it seems I’ve gotten pretty important.

“The fact that I can meet with you directly...that I’m the older brother of your wife. That’s the only value that society sees in me, it would seem...”

“Y-You need not be so hard on yourself...”

“I feel nothing but shame...about the fact that I need to use other people to hide the fact that I have no value...”

I came here to get advice and instead I’m listening to Hetter talk about his problems. I guess, in a way, that’s what families are like.

Now, as I was dealing with Hetter, I was also informed that Chette, who had married into another family, wanted to speak to me. Evidently, she wants to talk about Master Suiboku. Frankly, she’s someone I don’t want to see, other

than at really important family gatherings like funerals and weddings. Even so, I am fortunate to have something I'd like to ask her. Even if our chat gets derailed, I have a way of forcing the discussion back on topic. At least that's what I tell myself as I go to visit Chette at her home.

I'd already heard about it ahead of time, but it seems the house Chette married into is ranked lower than House Wynne. Of course, they're also considered lower than me, a direct vassal of Lord Sepaeda himself. That is why they treat me with utmost civility and hospitality. It's really uncomfortable, actually. I'm not used to being treated like the highest-ranked person in a room, so I feel like I'm imposing and being a nuisance.

Then you add in the fact that I'm going to be talking to Chette. All of this makes my original worries seem insignificant in comparison. Why didn't I use my day off to spend time with my beloved daughter? All of this is enough to make me regret my choice, but I also feel it's probably rude not to see her when I'm off and she specifically asked for my presence. This is what it means to be family, right? I guess I need to put up with it. Saiga puts up with his in-laws, so I need to do the same.

"Master Sansui, do you understand how supple my skin is? It's really smooth and silky, like satin!"

"Y-Yes... I can see it's much better than it used to be..."

"It's all thanks to the secret medicine Master Suiboku gave me! It lets me sleep very well, and every morning when I wake up, I'm completely refreshed! The only problem is that I sleep so well, it's hard to wake up, but thanks to that, I also feel much better of late..."

While I'm trying to have a conversation with my sister-in-law, Chette is busy talking about herself. Seeing as how I just came back from a distant country, surely she could at least ask something about that? I mean, even setting aside manners when dealing with relatives, you'd think it's something she'd have some interest in asking about.

At the very least, the people in Magyan were really interested in learning about the Arcana Kingdom. It's not like I'm expecting Chette to enthusiastically quiz me about Magyan and tell me how much she'd like to see it for herself, but

at the very least, I think she should at least ask how my work went on my journey, right? Even if she's not interested, I think she should at least pretend to be.

"But Master Suiboku has been teaching other people as well...and he has been instructing them on further restrictions on diet and the like, as well as exercise... Unfortunately, the people who follow his teachings put me to shame..."

I'm hardly one to talk, as an Immortal, but Chette has little in the way of common sense. Or maybe this is a sign that she accepts me as a member of her family. I mean, I'm sure even Chette behaves like a proper lady in front of strangers.

"When Master Suiboku comes by again, I'd certainly like to learn more from him!"

"Ah-Ahem... Yes, indeed, my master does know quite a lot. As his apprentice, I have only mostly learned his mastery of the sword, and I'm always surprised by the other types of knowledge he possesses."

I say what I'm actually feeling. I imagine that ordinary Immortals have a wide range of knowledge like my master. Since I spent all five hundred years of my training focusing on swordplay, I'm sure other Immortals would be quite disappointed in me. I'm still quite immature by Immortal standards, and given that I only know how to fight, I'm far from being a proper Immortal. Of course, if we go in that direction, there's a part of me that thinks it's my master's responsibility for not teaching me those things. But since I also know doing anything in half-measures is a bad thing, I suppose it's hard to tell whether or not his teaching policy is the right one or not.

"However, there are things I can't ask my master."

"Oh? What would that be?"

"I don't know how to interact with my young child..."

I naturally take the conversation back to the original subject. Honestly, maybe it's a little strange to be discussing my struggles as a father to a woman who is a mother, but there's nothing particularly wrong about it, right? That, and I'm just

scared to hear more of her beauty-related complaints. There's always the possibility she'll fall into a spiral of depression and end up in her manic-depressed state again.

"I currently have a fair amount of free time, but I'm going to be busy again soon. I want to do something for little baby Fanne in the short free time I have left..."

Chette looks surprised as she listens to me talk. It seems I really have caught her off-guard.

"Um, does that mean Master Suiboku has no family?"

"Yes... I've asked him in the past, and it seems he has no experience with women either."

"Oh, my..."

It seems the thing that completely caught Chette by surprise is that I'm not able to discuss how to interact with children with my master. Basically, that means my master has no children, and that seems particularly strange to Chette. Still, that's understandable. From Chette's perspective, I'm an Immortal and her younger sister's husband at the same time. So there's no reason for her to think that Immortals remain chaste or unmarried.

"Oh, yes, I believe I heard that you and Master Suiboku can't get drunk and you don't feel hungry unless you take medicine, yes?"

"Yes. That's how Immortals work."

"I could certainly never manage that."

She seems intensely surprised, which feels a bit odd, but I agree that it's really hard to imagine if you're not an Immortal. I mean, I felt the same way back before I started training.

"So, that's exactly why I don't know how to interact with a baby. I'd like to do something for her as a father..."

"I don't think you need to worry too much about it?"

Chette's remark is similar to what Blois and Lain told me earlier. She's not trying to flatter me; she really seems to feel this way.

“How do I phrase it? I’m told that you raised Lain from the time you adopted her as a baby. Given how good a job you’ve done with her, I think you just need to interact with Fanne in the same way, no?”

What Chette’s saying seems right. Since my first child has turned out pretty well so far, she’s telling me I just need to do the same thing with my second one. With that said, it’s a little different from what I’m trying to get at. I’m not too concerned about how Fanne will turn out in the long run, after all.

“It’s true that Lain is a good girl, and she adores Fanne. But...I just want to do something for her.”

“My... Blois certainly is a lucky one. To have a husband who cares that much for his family.” Chette smiles and for the first time I really see her as Blois’s older sister. “I hear quite a bit of complaining about husbands at society functions. There are things that are unique to nobles such as work and titles, but...there are also those concerns that are universal to men and women everywhere.”

Even nobles who have money and rank, and who are wealthy enough not to have to deal with the hard work of raising a child, don’t necessarily have perfectly smooth husband-wife relationships. No doubt there are plenty of people who take those problems seriously.

“That’s true when it comes to children. There are quite a few men who think child-rearing is the wife’s responsibility and won’t intervene, won’t try to be involved even when there are problems. In those cases...not only is there the influence on the child, but what’s just as painful is the lack of interest shown by the husband... That’s what it means to be a woman, a mother, a wife, and a human being.”

“I really don’t want to be a man like that.”

Yes, my concerns are valid, right? If I leave raising Fanne to the wet nurses, Lain, and Blois, not only am I neglecting Fanne, but I’m also taking Blois and Lain for granted. It’s not good to think that I’m fulfilling my role as a father just because I hold Fanne...because I soothe her when she cries...because I play with her.

“Then, allow me to tell you a secret about us women. How to make your wife

and daughter feel appreciated and relax.”

“Really?”

It’s rude now that I think about it, but I didn’t expect Chette to give me useful advice. Which is why I can’t help but ask “Really?” In this case, the “really” means “I really can’t believe you’re giving me useful information,” but it seems that the unspoken part of the sentence didn’t occur to her.

“This isn’t limited just to child-rearing, but...when talking adoringly about husbands at society functions, it’s often about the mistakes that the husband makes. That’s not because the wife wants to see them fail, but because they can talk about it afterward as husband and wife, and because they trust one another to speak to each other about their concerns and insecurities.”

“Ah, I see.”

It really is useful information. Yes, the relationship she’s talking about is the complete opposite of the sort of relationship that I’m worried about creating. I do want to do something for Fanne, but that’s not just for Fanne’s sake, that’s also for Blois’s and Lain’s sake as well. In that case, then talking to the two of them about Fanne also has something to do with that goal.

“However, do make sure you obey the wet nurse.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I feel some pressure from Chette, not the kind that comes when she’s teetering on the brink of madness, but because she’s deathly serious in her warning. I suppose she feels this is one thing she needs to make sure to warn me about before I do anything. After all, there are certain types of failures where just apologizing won’t cut it...

I return to the Wynne family estate from Chette’s manor. I feel some satisfaction at the unexpected bit of useful information. At the very least, my conversation with Chette was a lot more useful than my conversation with Hetter. I suppose Chette’s ability to see things as a mother and tell me what makes mothers happy in terms of what their husbands do is what makes her advice so valuable.

This, too, is similar to swordsmanship. For example, even when you're thinking about how to go on the offensive, if you think of things solely from the perspective of the attacker, you'll miss out on potential avenues of attack. You need to think from the perspective of the defender to fully understand where your attacks will be most effective.

That, and I'm starting to get a general sense of what I need to do. More than anything, I need to avoid moving without telling anyone and talk things out with Blois. Then, once that's done, talk things over again...

Communication and discussion... Those things are also important in maintaining a good relationship between husband and wife. Just as I'm pondering that fact, I feel my father-in-law's and mother-in-law's presences. They're both near Fanne, quietly shedding tears as they play with her and she crawls around the room.

"Heh, Sansui said the same thing, but she really does look like Blois."

"Yes, she looks exactly like her."

They both look happy, but there's also a certain sadness to them, as well. Both of them are emitting the same aura. And that's not mere coincidence; they know and understand each other perfectly, basking in the same shared emotion. Fanne is my second child and she also isn't their first granddaughter. As such, the tears aren't from matters related to noble titles or the complications concerning that.

"I never thought I'd be able to hold Blois's child like this..."

"Yes... It's like a dream come true."

I can't interrupt these two right now. Their suffering is something only they can understand and share. Blois has already finished her appointed task, that of serving as bodyguard to Lady Douve. She will never have to risk her life as part of her job in the future. But to them, while it was all in the past, the wounds are still fresh. No matter the reason, it hasn't changed that they had offered up their own daughter to serve as a shield for Lady Douve. They had literally given Blois to House Sepaeda to stand between their daughter and danger, and Blois had risked her life every day. There was no way to undo what had actually happened. Even if that fact doesn't bother Blois, it still bothers them. It simply

means they're good people.

"I'm told Sansui is wondering how best to act as a father... That's proof he cares deeply about Blois."

"Yes, he truly seems to love her..."

It makes me realize that families are connected to each other by a bond so strong that it doesn't even require that they actually know everything about each other. Even so, the words we exchanged are still there. Even if the weight is different, there's no misunderstanding between us.

"Sansui promised he'd make Blois happy and...it seems he wasn't lying."

"Yes... All that we failed to provide her, he's giving her instead..."

I turn my back to the two and go to Blois. I feel that it's the most important thing, the most vital thing, I can do for all of us, and for the entire family.

Later, Blois, Lain, and I are playing with Fanne. Fanne is already able to sit up on her own, and she looks over at me as she sucks on her fingers. I suppose she's trying to observe me carefully and remember who I am.

"Such little feet... They're going to get big before you know it and then she'll start walking around." I gently squeeze Fanne's little feet with my fingers. Maybe I shouldn't do that to a baby girl, but she accepts it without resistance. Instead, she watches me intently. "Lain, there was a time you were this little too. You grew up really quickly... Do you mind sitting next to Fanne?"

"Are you going to touch my feet too? It's fine with Fanne, but don't treat me like a baby!"

"Ha ha ha! Yeah, you're right, sorry." I apologize for my faux pas and continue to touch Fanne's feet. Not just one foot—I'm holding both of them. "Hee hee... Your parents were telling me that she looks just like you, Blois. I bet it won't be long before she starts to remind me of you too."

"You're getting ahead of yourself, Sansui."

"She'll probably look good in boys' clothes... No, I mean, I bet Lady Douve might make her dress that way."

“Aha, you really did think I looked good that way, didn’t you?”

“You’re beautiful, so you look good in anything, Blois.”

Blois huffs a bit and picks Fanne up, taking her away from me. “Fanne, your dad is terrible. He’s already planning to make you dress up like a boy. He should try putting on a dress instead, don’t you think?”

“I don’t look good in anything... C’mon, Blois, let me play a bit more with Fanne.”

“Hmph! I can’t leave my beloved daughter with some weirdo who touches feet!”

“I just wanted to touch them because they were adorable little footsies... Forgive me, Blois.”

“Don’t apologize to me. Isn’t that right, Lain?”

“That’s right, papa. You need to apologize to Fanne!”

Neither of them is actually angry, but they still direct harsh stares in my direction. I laugh as I apologize to them. I suppose the laugh spoils the sincerity of my apology, but it still feels the right thing to do. And from a corner, a little girl is watching us. It’s Lyra, of course.

“My, my... It seems I have no reason to be worried.”

If she says it, it must be true. I’m spending valuable, joyful time with my family.

Afterword

Thank you for picking up volume eight of The World's Least Interesting Master Swordsman! I'm Rokurou Akashi, the author.

We're all the way up to volume eight now, and things are going well in terms of sales. Please accept thanks not just from me as the author, but also from everyone involved in the book's creation.

So, now that you're reading the afterword, I assume you've already finished volume eight. Of course, there are those of you who might have already read the parts that were published on Shosetsuka ni Naro, and there might be others among you who will be reading the novel after reading this afterword.

Ahem, so, let me be honest here. I rewrote over three-quarters of the content. There's pretty much nothing left of the original.

It's not that I rearranged or rewrote the original structure. Instead, it's a completely different set of stories at this point. There are some additional episodes added in, but everything else was rewritten pretty much from the ground up.

There's also a lot that I've deleted, so when you include all that, it's about six-quarters different than the web novel version. Yes, I've completely gone over four quarters!

In this volume, about the only part that's pretty much the same as the web novel version is the part with Sansui, Blois, and Lain. The part with Sansui's students is also the same.

Ordinarily, I suppose I should be talking about Sansui's new family here, but I'd like to talk about Sansui's students here instead.

There was originally more that was supposed to be written about them, but I'm happy that I managed to get as much about them in here as I did.

They're pretty much all secondary characters, but I really like their little stories. They're just plain people, or people who are a little worse than average. I really love being able to illustrate society through their eyes.

I feel like I can't get the whole depth of the setting out if I just write about the surface. Maybe it's just my ego as a writer, but I'm very happy that I was able to include their stories in a printed volume.

Now, last but not least...

To Shiso, the illustrator. Thank you so much for your work. I look forward to further volumes with your illustrations.

-Rokurou Akashi

Bonus Short Story

Prank

In the Arcana Kingdom, Sunae and Tahlan were treated as foreign dignitaries. However, here in the Magyan Kingdom, Happine was the one who was considered an envoy from a foreign land. The land in question was so far away that not only was there no official interaction between it and Magyan, but so distant that the people of Magyan had never even heard of the place. Unlike modern Japan, it wasn't possible for the people of Magyan to know about all of the countries in the world and all of their different cultures over the centuries. To the Magyans, Happine may as well have been a visiting alien. Her facial features, skin, eyes, and hair, along with her clothing, were all fresh to the people of the kingdom. Naturally, she was the center of attention.

"The equipment of the Arcanian soldiers all looked very heavy and uncomfortable, but the ladies were all dressed in very glamorous clothes."

"Evidently, in the Arcana Kingdom, high-born women are expected to be like flowers. That's why they dress that way."

"That sort of clothing doesn't look very practical as daily wear, but it seems like it'd be nice for a date. I'd imagine the men would enjoy seeing it..."

"What's more interesting is the fabric. I've heard there are rolls of that fabric among the gifts brought by the delegation but...maybe they're out of reach for us."

"I've considered sending a merchant to go buy some. I mean, it'd be one thing if it took a whole sea journey, but evidently you can get there on land, and it's not even a distance that requires years of travel..."

"There're supposed to be formal relations between the countries soon, right? Then you better be careful; there might be punishments if you get ahead of yourself and do something without approval."

“True, then... Maybe we can get to know the dignitaries...”

The Arcanians began hearing people discuss such topics all through in the palace they were staying in. Had they simply seen the Arcanian clothing in a random shop, it would probably have been dismissed as a mere curiosity. However, because that clothing had been worn by dignitaries who had brought a great deal of treasure with them on their visit, it appeared to signify both status and fashion in the eyes of those who saw it. Happine, wearing clothing that wasn't simply unusual, but impossible to acquire for those who sought it, was the target of envious and longing gazes from the people in the palace.

“Happine, it seems they're paying attention to your clothes. Though...just your clothes, it seems.”

“Oh, shut up. You don't need to point out that last part.”

No one seems to be paying attention to my clothes...I guess it's because it's not noble clothing, but...

The three girls—Sunae, Happine, and Zuger—had grown used to people staring at them. After all, they had received a similar kind of attention in the countries they had stopped in on their way to Magyan. If anything, the fact that they'd been staying a while in Magyan meant that they weren't attracting quite as much attention as they had on their brief stops along the way. Besides, Happine was a daughter of House Batterabbe, and thus she was used to drawing attention with the clothing she was wearing, even in Arcana. It wasn't particularly unusual for her to have the same stares directed at her in a foreign country. If anything, Happine found her curiosity drawn to the outfits that the people looking at her were wearing.

“Say, Sunae...got a moment?”

“Mm? What is it?”

“I'd like to try on the same clothes you're wearing. Would that be all right?” Happine said with a deathly serious tone and expression. Sunae and Zuger were briefly caught by surprise at the sheer intensity of her curiosity, but they both felt a bit underwhelmed at the actual content of her anticlimactic request.

At the same time, Zuger grasped something that Happine had thought she'd

kept hidden from her interest. *She's probably always been interested in Princess Sunae's clothing. But she didn't want to have to ask Sunae about them, and the difference in their physiques made it hard to ask to borrow a set...*

What had started as playful curiosity in wanting to try out a foreign outfit had been elevated by Happine's outsized pride into a request that required her to behave as though she were asking for a great favor from Sunae. There was something adorable about that. Of course, it wasn't the sort of cuteness that would draw chuckles, but Zuger still found it endearing.

"I don't mind at all. But you're being a bit too serious, aren't you?"

"Who cares? What's wrong with taking things seriously?"

"Now you're just trying to justify yourself... Fine, I'll have them readied for you."

In contrast to Happine's intensity, Sunae responded with a faint note of dismissiveness. While she understood Happine's curiosity, the sheer seriousness behind her request was faintly exasperating. Still, it wasn't a difficult request to fulfill while they were in Magyan. There was no need for Sunae to be cruel to Happine, and so she nodded the affirmative.

"Really? Thank you!" Happine said with a happy smile. She looked like a child who had just been bought a particularly nice present.

Zuger was smiling as she watched Happine. Sunae soon turned her eyes to Zuger as well.

"Do you not want to try them on yourself?"

"Huh? Me?"

Zuger hadn't expected that Sunae would make the offer and stared blankly back at her. At that moment, Zuger imagined wearing the same clothing as the Magyan princess.

"N-No, I couldn't! I wouldn't be able to wear something like that!"

Zuger's response almost sounded like she was insulting the clothing of a foreign culture by describing the outfit as "something like that." However, based on the fact that Zuger's face was beet red, Sunae knew that she was

simply embarrassed at the thought of wearing such a revealing outfit. Zuger always wore thicker clothing that didn't show much skin, so she was probably too shy to wear clothes like Sunae's, which showed off the contours of the wearer's body clearly. Happine and Sunae knew Zuger's personality well enough to understand all of this, and they exchanged a glance. There was no real reason to make Zuger wear a Magyan outfit, but...

"I see, you're saying my kingdom's clothing is embarrassing. Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Huhhh? N-No, I don't mean that at all!"

"Are you suggesting I have bad taste?"

"N-No, I don't mean that either!"

However much they might bicker on occasion, both Happine and Sunae were fond of Zuger. They wouldn't normally go out of their way to make her uncomfortable.

"Then there should be no problem. Isn't that right, Happine?"

"True, true, Sunae. She'd just be wearing the same clothes as me, after all."

But that aside, they still wanted to see her in Magyan clothing. Women were complicated creatures, after all.

"All right, I'll wear them, then."

With the two of them against her, there was no way Zuger would be able to put up any resistance. Further, if she was honest with herself...

"But, ah...I can at least pick the color, right?"

The fact of the matter was, she wanted to try them on as well.

It went without saying, but the clothes Sunae wore were expensive and rare even in the Magyan Kingdom. Even if they weren't wearing formal attire, royals weren't going to be dressed in clothes that they had picked off a rack. For most people, it would have been practically impossible to wear an outfit identical to hers, no matter how curious they were about trying it on. But Sunae was a princess of the Magyan Kingdom, and she had a fair amount of authority within

the palace, so she was able to take Zuger and Happine to the clothier's chambers and have them pick out clothes that fit them.

"W-Wow, this is amazing, isn't it, Lady Happine...?"

The room was filled with clothing of the highest-quality material and crafted with the utmost care and skill. It was, in essence, a treasure chamber. In fact, there were soldiers posted to guard the room, and the clothier was accompanied by several dozen subordinates. Zuger, who had little experience in such glamorous places, was extremely nervous.

"Yes, quite. I didn't expect it to be on this scale."

Happine voiced her agreement, but there was a huge difference in their attitudes. While Zuger had been born into a family of hex artists, Happine was the daughter of one of the Four Great Houses. The rooms in her home didn't quite match this one in scale, however there were similar chambers and clothiers employed by House Batterabbe.

"Noble families who fall on hard times tend to let rooms like this go, but..."

"Hmph. Magyan may value strength, but it's not as though we don't value formality. There's no way we'd cut corners for something as important as clothing."

Listening to the pair, who came from the upper-most echelons of high society, Zuger couldn't help but feel a sense of inferiority next to them. While she had been born to a family with a special bloodline and a certain amount of status, those two were far more important than she had ever been.

Maybe I shouldn't be here...No, that's not true.

Zuger reflected on her own position due to that sense of inferiority, but that reflection reminded her that she had been more useful than she had generally given herself credit for. She didn't need anyone to reassure her in order to regain a sense of her own value. It was understandable that she still felt a bit overawed next to the princess and the noblewoman, but she was still an important part of their little family unit. She was someone whom Saiga and the others needed...and she also loved being by their sides.

"Then...can I see what sort of clothes there are?"

“Oh, dear, Zuger got out ahead of me!”

“Despite all her reluctance... You’ve grown stronger, Zuger.”

Zuger smiled at the teasing. The other two joined her as they began to pick out their own clothes. After a while, Happine and Zuger had finished putting on Magyan-style outfits and were looking at one another’s reflections in a mirror.

“Zuger, you look wonderful! Hold yourself out with more confidence!”

“I-It’s still a little embarrassing!”

Happiness and shyness mixed as they enjoyed the clothes of a foreign culture. Both of them couldn’t help but feel a surge of excitement at being dressed differently than usual. Sunae found herself pleased at watching them as well. There was no way that the princess could be displeased when her friends, her new family members, were enjoying her homeland’s culture.

“Both of you look good, though not quite as good as I do. Now, let’s show Saiga.”

“Yes! I’m sure he’ll be surprised!”

“Huh? We’re going to show Lord Saiga too?!”

Both Happine and Sunae seemed entirely at ease with showing off for the most important man in their lives. However, the more she thought about it and understood that this was the natural flow of events, Zuger still found herself extremely embarrassed at the prospect of having Saiga see her this way.

“If you don’t want to do it, Zuger, I’ll go by myself.”

“I imagine Saiga will be very disappointed not to see you in that dress, Zuger. He’s been working so hard; surely he could use the encouragement?”

“Well...”

Zuger hesitated for a moment, then steeled herself to be a little more assertive.

“Do you think Lord Saiga would be happy...to see me wearing these clothes?”

“We’re going to check! Of course, I already know what’ll happen!”

“Since we’re all wearing the same clothes, it might show the difference in the

base material underneath.”

“T-Then I might be the best-looking! A-As much as I would hate to overshadow you two!”

The three girls laughed happily.

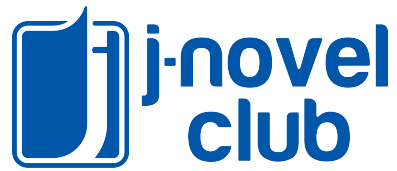
“Yes, then let’s have Saiga pick who looks the best!”

“That’s true... He’s going to marry three women. He’ll have to show how he can deal with a challenge like this!”

“Yes!”

They had gone from trying to cheer Saiga up to putting him on the spot and handing him a problem. However, it’s not as though any of the three actually wanted him to rank them.

No, they just wanted to play a little prank on the man who they all loved.



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The World's Least Interesting Master Swordsman: Volume 8

by Rokurou Akashi

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Ebook edition 1.0: April 2022